

# SCIENCE FICTION MONTHLY

SPECIAL POSTER OFFER!

INTERVIEW

WITH D G COMPTON

PLUS

SF ART FROM CHRIS FOSS

ANTHONY ROBERTS

AND TIM WHITE





S.F.  
MONTHLY



# Introduction

## Time and Space

This month we're living up to the word 'fiction' in our name and publishing three short stories. None of them are from famous authors, but it's all cracking good stuff. Rob Holdstock's story, 'To Lay the Piper', follows a very interesting theme; it's a time travel story in which the main characters go back to thirteenth-century Germany to discover the truth about the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

Philip Boast's story, 'Spaceout', also follows an interesting theme. The hero is a man called Kelloran who, unfortunately, finds himself marooned in space. Of course, his relatives have to be notified of his plight and that's when the sparks start to fly, because, as every one who reads *SF* knows, space men don't have family commitments, let alone extra-marital affairs!

The third story is called 'Scoop' and comes from Robin Douglas whose story 'The Tunkun' appeared in *SFM* Vol 2 No 3.

Now I've given away the plot of nearly all the stories in this issue, we'd better move on to the author interview.

## The Continuous D G Compton

D G Compton has had eight *SF* novels published during the last ten years: *The Quality of Mercy* appeared in 1965 and was followed by *Farewell Earth's Bliss* (1966), *The Silent Multitude* (1967), *Synthajoy* (1968), *The Electric Crocodile* and *Chronucles* (1970), *The Missionaries* (1972) and *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* (1974). The best known, and probably the most successful, is *Synthajoy* which is the story of a scientist who has discovered a method of synthesising intense emotional and physical experiences.

Peter Linnett conducted the interview with Mr Compton and has also prepared an introduction to the author's work.

# Contents

To Lay the Piper  
ROBERT HOLDSTOCK

Spaceout  
PHILIP BOAST

News  
The *SF* Novels of D G Compton  
PETER LINNETT

Scoop  
ROBIN DOUGLAS  
Bargain Poster Offer  
Query Box and Readers' Letters  
An Interview with D G Compton  
PETER LINNETT

# Volume 3 Number 4

Page Two

Page Eight

Page Twelve

Page Sixteen

Page Nineteen

Page Twenty-one

Page Twenty-five

Page Twenty-six



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# Robert Holdstock To Lay the Piper

'It's raining,' said Corin as he led us up the winding cattle track, using a stick to steady himself.

'No it isn't,' I said, holding out my hand to check. 'It's your imagination.'

We climbed on in silence. It was dark and behind us the lights of Hameln were being doused. 'Can you see the hut?' I called, bent under the weight of the power unit I carried.

'I think so,' said Corin, and Adam grunted with annoyance.

'You either can or you can't,' he snapped. 'Let me see.' He walked up to where Corin had stopped and was peering up the Koppelberg Hill. 'Is that a light?' said Corin.

'It's a star,' I said, peering from under my back pack.

'It's a light,' said Adam. 'It's the hut. At last.'

We plodded on, the soft soil beneath our feet making walking difficult. It was cold too, and the clothes we wore, copies of late thirteenth-century German garments, were no protection against the night air.

Down the hill, off to the left, I could see the purple glow that was the videoscopic probe. Malcolm had stopped there working, obscured by the night, but peering deeper, deeper into the mysteries of the hill behind Hameln.

... and the Piper led the children out of the town and across a brook, which gurgled playfully beneath the bridge they crossed. Louder he played, louder and faster and the children danced and followed. Thus he brought them to a hill and there he stopped. He changed the tune he played and after a moment a part of the hill rolled back to reveal a cave stretching under the ground. And the Piper played and danced into the darkness, and the children followed ...

Outside the tiny hut we stopped. Christian was inside, we hoped, but we could hear no voices. Adam checked the reading on the power unit and grunted his satisfaction. 'We can move back further in ten minutes.'

'Good,' I said. This time, too, it would be a jump of only fifty years or so. The train would be much less. Jumping back from the twenty-first had been difficult and we had arrived in the early fourteenth century instead of the late thirteenth. Now I felt the excitement of anticipation building up within me as I thought of that final jump that would take us almost to the very day

when the Piper had led the children through the streets of Hameln and to their doom. Now at last we would see for a fact that the legend was no legend ...

If, that is, Christian had weaned the information from the man within the hut. Otherwise we would have to search the years until we found for ourselves the day the Piper had come to Hameln, to leave it a shaken town.

Adam must have seen the look in my eyes. 'You still believe there was a Piper, don't you?'

I nodded. 'We virtually found as much today.'

Corin, about to knock upon the door of the hut, turned on me. 'We didn't, you know. There wasn't a villager, remember, who knew what we referred to ... not a single soul would admit to knowing about the Piper. All we found was that gap in the records.'

Corin's sudden scepticism surprised me. All we found? That gap in the records was enough for me! The Piper had come. Not in 1284 as Browning would have us think, but fourteen years earlier, in 1270, the same year that the ruling hands of Hameln changed. A date in the early Seventies had been implied in the manuscript that had caused us to come here from our own time, and as that date became more certain so my excitement grew. For centuries the first reference to the Pied Piper of Hameln, the Ratcatcher, had been in sixteenth-century German literature stating the date as 1284 and placing a very sixteenth-century bias upon the story. But now we had an early fourteenth-century reference to a colourful Piper who had enchanted the children away from the town.

It then occurred to me that at this very moment in nearby Hanover a Saxon scholar was at work upon the very manuscript we would not unearth until the spring of 2003.

Corin knocked on the door. Christian answered it a moment later and motioned us inside.

'Leave the pack outside,' he said to me. 'There's hardly any room in here at all.'

'Has the old man spoken at all?' I asked.

Christian shook his head.

'He's spoken, but nothing I wanted to hear. I'm sure he's the cripple - his left leg's gammy. But he denies the Piper ever existed. I've given up.'

'Defeatist,' said Adam. We stood in one corner and looked around us. It was a very small hut, built cleverly with a minimum of timber and small, roughly chipped stone blocks. There was a small hearth with a very large pot upon the ashes of a recent fire. Wood-carvings, very crudely carved, littered the place, some of them animals, most of them people. In the opposite corner, sitting in a battered chair, staring at the ground, was a small man with trembling hands. He looked considerably older than I knew him to be.

'What's his name?'

'Hansel something,' said Christian. 'I forget. Very German.'

I watched the old man as he seemed to recline, oblivious of all. 'Is he the only cripple in or around Hameln?' I asked.

'How do we know this is the right one?'

'There are other cripples,' said Christian, nodding. 'But I found out he

came to live here when he was 12 ... that would be about right if the villagers, or rather townspeople, had banished him as a jinx after the Piper had taken the rest of the kids away.'

'What sort of age range were the other cripples?' asked Corin.

Christian said, 'Young to middle-aged. Hansel here is the oldest.'

'Then the others are too young,' I said.

'Listen to what we've found,' I glanced at Corin. Corin whispered, 'Although there are several old people over 65, and many under 55, there are no people in Hameln between those two ages.'

I felt my heart beating with excitement. It had to mean something - 5 to 15 were the ages taken by the Piper. A ten year span!

'Hansel is 62,' said Christian. 'And he came here, I found out, when he was 12, he was an orphan. But his age would be right if the youngest age taken was about 5, and was now, or would have been now, 55.'

Adam snorted. 'It still isn't proof positive. Nobody, Christian, nobody had ever heard of the Piper when we talked to them.'

Christian looked puzzled. I said, 'They might have forgotten.' That didn't make sense and I knew it, so I added, 'Or the memory hurts and they're trying to erase it.'

Corin shook his head. 'People don't do that sort of thing. It's reasonable that older people, the 65 and older group, would like to forget the grief of that day, if it occurred, but the under 55s would have no real reason to forget the tragedy as they were too young at the time to have known about it.'

'Which brings us back to Hansel,' I said, pointing. 'The only man to have lived through the trauma and the only man far enough from the rest of the town for us to work on him.'

'And he pretends there was no Piper,' said Christian.

'Then I suggest we believe him,' said Adam coldly.

'Explain the records, then,' I said, annoyed that he should adopt a continually dissenting tone. 'Where are the people who should fill that ten year gap? Why is the only contender a cripple who fits in with the legend perfectly?'

Adam shook his head. 'The Child Crusades,' he said.

Now I felt on safer ground. 'Rubbish.

The Children's Crusade occurred in 1212, decades earlier ...'

'That's the Crusade the textbooks write about, and I wasn't thinking so much of that one as of a second attempt to get children from Europe to the Palestine battlefield. There is no reason why it shouldn't have occurred and the records be lost - look how long it took us to find the Hanoverian manuscript.'

I shook my head. 'We asked the townspeople whether at any time the children of the town had gone on pilgrimages, or to war ... they said no. The only time the youth ever suffered was in 1259. Just the male population, though.'

'Yes, yes,' said Adam impatiently. 'But look, we know those people in Hameln were doing more lying than anything; they were scared of us, they were falsifying and we can't really believe anything they said ... or didn't say.'

'Then they could have lied about there being no Piper,' I concluded logically. Adam shrugged.

Corin said, 'All I know is, there is a segment of the population missing that cannot be explained. I had the distinct impression when we talked with people in the market place that they were afraid of us and that they were hiding something. I'm sceptical about the Pied Piper as a living being, but I'm in no doubt that there is something going on, or that something has gone on these five decades past. There is something deeper than legend here. Don't you think, Adam?'

'Oh, I would agree with that,' said Adam. 'That's why I'm here.' He glanced at me. 'But there was no Pied Ratcatcher, I'll stake my life.'

Christian said, 'Talk to the old man before he falls asleep, or dies. He rambles a bit and he's had tempered, but I've got him thinking about the past and you might have some luck in getting him to tell all.'

Corin nodded and we moved over to where old man Hans sat and reminisced. 'When Malcolm comes up from the bottom of the hill we'll decide whether or not to go back fifty years.'

I opened the shutters that looked out across the valley, and peered into the darkness. It was a magnificent night; the moon was high and almost full, the dense clouds of early evening were dispersed and now the stars shone through and winked down upon this land of the fourteenth century. Hameln glowed in the distance, tiny lights from tiny houses, lights that blinked on and blinked off as late workers went about their business. The Weser sparkled in the moonlight as it wound away to the south, throwing out streams here and there, one of which we'd crossed as perhaps, fifty years in the past, the children of Hameln had crossed it, tiny feet dancing across the worn planks of a bridge.

Behind me Corin, in his perfect thirteenth-century German, probed and eased the answers from Hansel the cripple.

'Why did you move onto the hill, Hans?'

'They made me,' came the reply, mumbled, hoarse, unwillingly given. Hans stared deftly at the floor, his whiskered face pale in the candlelight.

'Who made you, Hans?'

'Who are you? Angry, obstinate. Why





are you bothering me with questions?' 'Who made you Hans? Who made you move here?'

'The people,' he said, slapping the arms of his chair. 'The people made me.'

'Why?' 'Again the hands slapped the chair. 'Crippled. Couldn't walk properly. They got rid of me.'

'Why? Didn't they like cripples?'

'They thought ... they thought I was evil. I saw things that happened ... they thought I was evil ...' he trailed off.

'Did you come to this hut before or after the Pied Piper came to Hameln?'

'I saw Hans stiffen a fraction. 'He asked me that,' he said, looking swiftly at Christian, then away. 'Don't know any Pied Piper.'

'Are you sure, Hans? A piper dressed in different colours, whose music could make rats follow him, or children. A man who took the children of Hameln into the hill below this hut?'

'Don't know anything about that. Never heard of a coloured ratcatcher.'

'And when the children were all gone, and only you were left, didn't the townspeople think you were possessed and banish you up here?'

'No ...'

'Did they think the Piper would come back and take more children if he realised he had lost you?'

'No ...' Hans was becoming quite agitated. His head was turning this way and that. His mouth was open and I could see his eyes were clenched shut. 'No Piper ... no Piper ... why do you keep asking me about the Piper ...? too long ago ... bad things, bad things.'

'What bad things Hans? Things when you were 12? What were they Hans?'

There was a knock at the door and Corin looked up and swore. The old man seemed to relax a little but I could see tears in the corners of his eyes. Adam went over and let Malcolm in. He was dirty with mud and he carried photographic prints. He looked at the old man. 'That the cripple?'

Corin nodded and brought him up to date with what we had all found. Malcolm stared down at his plates.

'I don't know,' he said. 'There isn't much evidence for the Piper story in what you say ... nobody knowing about him, or prepared to admit they know about him ... but what about these?'

He passed the plates round. They were

crumpled and not well prepared because Malcolm's equipment was limited.

What they showed was horrible. Malcolm explained. 'I probed into the hill foot by foot. There was plenty of evidence for the top few feet having been dug up within the last century or so – possibly the townspeople trying to find where the cavern was. But there was only a very tiny cave, and very very deep. It's mostly filled, too. About thirty feet into the hill I spotted it. This is the plate. As you can see it's crammed with dense material ... at the edges you can clearly make them out.'

'Skeletons,' said Corin, shocked. 'And small skeletons at that.'

'Hundreds of them,' said Malcolm, looking through his other plates. 'He must have taken them into the hill and killed them ...'

'And left by another route?'

Malcolm shrugged. 'There was just solid rock deeper in. No passageways that I could pick up. We'll have to go back and see. I'm sure there's more to the legend than just legend. Aren't you? Again I nodded. Corin was looking thoughtful. He took the probe plate showing the massed bones of the children over to Hansel and knelt down beside the old man. 'Look, Hans. Look. This is a picture of your friends of fifty years ago, all your chums, all your girlfriends. Their bones, Hans. They were taken into the mountain and killed by the Piper. These are their bones, and they're right below you Hans, inside thirty feet of rock and soil. Buried. Now will you tell me there was no Piper? Tell, Hans, tell me all I must know – I must get even with the Piper for what he did to your friends ...'

Hans was shaking his head, staring at the picture. He reached out for it and took it in trembling hands, staring down at the whiteness that were the skeletons, all heaped and intertangled in their earthy grave.

We waited silently, watching every motion of the old man's body. For a long while he stared at the picture and then, slowly, it slid from his fingers. Corin picked it up and was about to comment when, faintly, almost weeping, Hans began to speak ...

'He came at dawn. A spring dawn, before any of the town was up ... He played the pipe ... he played the pipe as he stood in the town square where the market is ... such a tune you have never heard before, a tune that seemed to talk to me as I lay in bed. I went to the window and looked out. The sun was not yet up but the morning was very bright and I saw the Piper in the square and he saw me, and he waved. He went on playing and I could feel my two feet dancing. I didn't dance very well because my left foot was crippled, but they didn't seem to mind. They jigged and jogged and that tune drifted through the morning air.'

'By the time I was out in the street there were lots of children, older than me and younger than me, and they were all running round the Piper, holding hands and laughing and I went over and held hands and laughed too, and the tune played on and we all danced and laughed. The sun came up and the shutters opened with bangs and rattles and all the people in the town came out and watched the sight.

Every child was there, from little Hanna who was just 4 years old, to the bully – I forget his name. He was three years older than me and liked to push me around. But now he was dancing with the rest of us, as happy as you like.

'All the parents were out in the streets and smiling. I remember seeing them all talking and smiling, most of them still in their night clothes like we all were. The priest from my orphanage came over to me and put a coat round my shoulders, but I hadn't noticed the early morning chill and I hardly noticed the coat. I was too happy. I'd never been so happy in all my life.'

'Then the Piper unfolded the flaps of his coat, which was all patchwork in reds and greens and blues, and he gave one flap to one of the older girls and the other to one of the youngest girls, and he got everybody to hold onto the one in front and form a snake, and then he danced away, playing his pipe and waving to the parents who, I expect, were delighted that he was taking us off their hands for a few hours. Round and round the square he went, up the streets as far as the Abbey, and back again to the square, with us following, hanging on in two long columns of boys and girls. We danced and whistled, those of us who could, and I was at the end because I kept falling over my feet, but when I was at the end it was easy to hold onto the boy in front and I danced round the square with them all.'

'Soon I remember seeing no parents, no adults. They were all inside eating breakfast or doing the washing, and then the Piper led us down the streets of Hameln into the country. We all followed, still hanging on to keep the snakes intact. He led us up to the stream between Koppelberg and Hameln, and that was where I fell, because my snake waded through the water so the little kids could cross over the bridge, and when I came to the water's edge I was frightened of getting my bad foot wet. So I ran round and crossed the bridge but I was a long way behind and I couldn't run fast.'

'The Piper took them to the hill, still playing away and dancing and jiggling, and all the children, even me, dancing behind him, though I was too far behind to hang onto anybody.'

'Then he stopped playing and turned round and called out that he was going to take us and show us a magic place in the hill, and we all shouted YES, and I ran after them, but they were running too, some running faster than the Piper himself, so that when he reached the hill, a few feet up its slope, he was surrounded by children. Then he shouted into the ground and told the children to stand back, and I couldn't quite see then, but they all started to shout and laugh and I could see the edges of a big cave open up.'

'They all climbed in with the Piper helping them, and then he climbed in himself and helped the remaining few down into the

magic place. I reached the edge of the hole and I could see it was a tunnel but you had to jump in first and I didn't dare. I could hear the sound of voices echoing from deep in the hill and the occasional note of music from the Piper's flute. And then the hill just closed, snap! ... there was nothing left, no hole, no cave. Just me.'

'And when the people came looking I remember I was crying and they thought I was wicked and sent me to live with an old man in this hut. When he died I lived on my own and they never let me back into Hameln again, not even the priest came to see me.'

'That's what happened and now ... go away, leave me. I'm old and I want to forget. I had forgotten until you came pestering. So go away.'

We went away. We went outside and gathered our equipment. Corin said, 'That was convincing enough, wasn't it?'

I said, 'But where did he take them? What was that hole in the ground? Was it magic?'

Adam snorted. 'We'll know soon enough. I suppose we are going back.'

'To early spring 1270,' said Corin. Adam grunted.

'You're not still sceptical are you?' asked Christian. 'You've just had an eyewitness account. What more do you want?'

Adam shrugged. The power pack was charged and the field set. Any time we could jump back. Adam said, 'I don't know. That old man sounded to me ... well, as if he were telling a story. Do you see what I mean? A story rather than a true account of something that happened to him. It didn't ring true.'

I shook my head, but there were more exciting things at hand and I forgot Adam's disbelief. We travelled back in time by fifty years, and we arrived on a spring day in 1270, in the distance Hameln sat in the Valley of the Weser, waiting for us. The hut was still beside us, it was empty though it was clearly being lived in. With no second thought we set off down the hill.

At the bottom of the hill, however, we realised we had come too late. There was a patch of grassland already much dug, a clear sign that many people had been here and digging frantically, as if to reach down to where the children had been taken. By all the signs the digging had been performed over a month ago, Malcolm decided that it had been within the last six weeks. When our packs registered enough power for a six week jump we went back by that much again.

Corin's chronometer read late March. The wind was keen, but the sky was blue and the ground beneath our feet was firm and untouched. In the distance the brook gurgled merrily. We could not see Hameln because of the trees, so we hid our equipment somewhere well away from where we stood and moved furtively, carefully into the streets of the town to see what we could see.

We were disappointed. Everything was normal and after an hour or so we left the town and returned to our packs to sit and rest during the night. I don't know what we had really expected to see – a sign of the Piper, perhaps – but we had seen nothing.



There was plenty of evidence that children of all ages were still around, running through the streets and among the crowded market places.

We had seen rats too. No Piper had yet been to entice the rodents of the town into the Weser. A small wooden house with brightly painted shutters stood where, in 1602, the Rattenfängerhaus would be built. There were no ratcatchers in Hameln of 1270. The place was ripe for plague.

Corin was uneasy. I asked him what was up and he shrugged. "Something about the way the adults were behaving," he said. "It was wrong. Or at least, it wasn't right... I don't know how to explain it. Didn't you notice?"

I confessed I hadn't noticed anything. Malcolm was nodding as he lay and watched the stars. "I know what you mean, Corin," he said. "They seemed dazed..."

"Yes - dazed. Wandering a little aimlessly..."

"Concentrating for ages on houses or people. I saw one old man staring at his stick as if he'd never seen it before."

"The children were all right," I observed. I had watched the children carefully. There had been nothing strange about them.

"Yes," said Corin. "The children were all right. And I expect it's just imagination. Probably fatigue. Let's get some sleep, eh? We have to be up at four."

We were up long before then. A rough hand shook me awake. It was very dark, the night sky speckled with stars and the gruesome silhouettes of trees surrounding me. I sat up and stared into the frightened face of Corin. "Can you hear it?"

I listened, and listened again. There was a noise coming from Hameln, a noise that could only be described as the screaming of a whole town, the hysterical yelling of an entire population of men, women and children. We shook the others awake and they all listened to the sounds of confusion and terror drifting through the still night, across the Weser's brooks and streams, and through the trees.

"My God, what's happening over there?" Christian was on his feet, staring into the darkness.

"It sounds as if they're killing each other," said Corin.

"Go down to the brook," I said to Christian, "and have a look. We'll follow with the equipment." He was gone in a flash. We grabbed our cameras and inspected them carefully. There had to be no mistake about anything that we recorded in Hameln when the Piper came... or whatever. "What time is it?" I asked. Corin inspected the chronometer.

"Fifteen to midnight." The moon was just above the trees, now, staring at us, full-faced and silver. As it rose, so the darkness was dispersed slightly. "Have we got everything?" asked Corin eventually. I checked. Cameras, needle guns, smoke

bombs, tape-recorders, sample bags. We were all carrying identical equipment. We wanted five identical records. I took Christian's pack and we raced down to the brook. He was standing on the bridge staring towards the distant town, whose nearer houses were illuminated in ghostly silhouette by the flames of a fire in the central square. I gave Christian his equipment and we ran across the fields until we were at the outskirts of the town. We all took different routes, down alleys and smaller streets until we came to the square where the fire had been lit.

It was horrifying. Many of them were in their night clothes and others wore grotesque costumes; the adult population seemed possessed, running about the fire and laughing, shouting, waving their arms. Many of them were eating...

I heard Corin arrive beside me. "They're eating round loaves. Why? Why eat bread when you're going crazy?"

Behind me Adam whispered, "I'll be right back."

A huge pole had been driven into the ground in the middle of the square, very close to the raging fire, and to it was tied virtually every child in the town. They sobbed and struggled, but they were tied with thin, strong twine and they could do no more than jerk against their bonds, and run and kick, and chase their parents as they celebrated some midnight glory that we could not imagine.

I could see Christian across the square snapping away at the scene before him. I turned on my recorder and began to take photographs myself, stills and some short sequences of motion picture. I was still taking close-up shots of the more hysterical adults when Christian arrived at my side, having skirted the square and remained unseen. "They're trying to conjure up some spirit or other..." he said.

"What?" hissed Corin. "A spirit? How do you know?"

"I saw them and heard them. There are three of the more important townsmen sitting near the fire making runes in the dust... and that's not all," he looked sick. "They're making them with blood. They've got three or four heads, I think they're children's heads."

"Christ," said Corin. "The Devil?" I asked. "Are they calling up the Devil?"

"I don't know," said Corin. "Adam's the man who would know and he's off somewhere." I was searching for the three townsmen that Christian had referred to. I spotted them eventually, squatting almost in the fire itself. One, in fact, was burning up one side. I could see his hair singing, his shirt, which was all he wore, beginning to brown and crisp. He didn't seem to notice. The children, moaning and screaming, began to fight among themselves. I snapped and recorded, then Adam came back.

Before he could speak Corin urged him to go and see if he could make out the runes the three men drew.

"OK - here, see what you make of that." He thrust something into Corin's hands, dropped his equipment and raced off across the square, veering and cowering as the rest of the crowd were doing. I looked at the loaf Corin held, broke a bit and ate it.

"At a time like this he thinks of food," said Malcolm. "What's up with him?"

But I was watching Corin's face and he was watching me; we were coming to the same conclusion fast. I could see it in his eyes.

Adam raced back to us. "Christ!" he screamed. "They're calling up the dead of the town for us far back as Hameln goes." His eyes searched all about; they were wide, frightened. "I don't know where they found out how to do it, but that's what they're doing."

"The dead..." Malcolm was horrified. Even as he spoke I could feel the coldness of the air. I saw the fire die a little bit and the sky seemed to cloud over so that no stars shone... but there were no clouds in the heavens. "They've gone crazy."

"Not crazy..." I said.

"They've freaked out," said Corin. He held up the loaf. "How did they get it?"

"What, the bread?" asked Malcolm.

"What's bread got to do with anything?"

"Ergot," said Adam quickly. "This bread is made from cereal contaminated with a fungus that contains LSD. Not the sort our predecessors used to push, but the natural form, not as powerful but just as hallucinogenic. It happened all over Europe during these centuries, whole populations came down sick after baking bread made from the stuff. The whole of Hameln is on a trip. And in their hallucinogenic, freaky state they're doing something they'd never dare do normally... they're calling up the dead... and looking..."

Shadows. They moved from the darkness of the streets, tenuous shadows, transparent and hideous. They came from behind us and from in front of us, drifting through the night, loof manifestations of Hameln's dead past.

The town of Hameln went wild and the maniacal adult population began to dance with even greater hysteria, trying to touch the ghosts of the dead, dancing around them and between them and even through them.

Suddenly, as we watched, the m  le of insane people closed about the children, seemingly under the orders of the ghostly nightmares that drifted all about, watching with their unblinking eyes. The children screamed and began to run as far as their bonds would let them, but it was no use

running... I saw the flashing of metal, at first bright silver, but eventually dull red. Malcolm and Adam watched in silent horror, while Corin sobbed and sank to his knees and I just went on snapping away, perhaps as a reflex action in an attempt to conquer my rising gorge.

Within minutes the fire burned high again and the adult population of Hameln was roaring and screaming as they danced with the dead, totally oblivious of the slaughter they had just committed. The square was thick with blood and severed limbs. I never saw the little crippled boy, Hans, but he must have been watching from a window somewhere, for I heard a child's cry, just briefly, from down the street to my right.

It must have been Hans for that night he was the only child alive, perhaps at that moment he would have rather been dead. I know I would have.

"The Piper never came," said Corin as we sat at the edge of the town in the early hours of the morning, all of us trembling with horror at the sight we had seen. "The children died at the hands of their parents."

The sky grew brighter and the world moved towards another day, but from the town came the sounds of sobbing and despair. Christian left us for a while to go to see what was going on. The dead spirits had dispersed now, and the effects of the drug the people of Hameln had eaten had worn off - for the time being, at least.

"Very soon," said Adam, "they'll come this way dragging the bodies of their children and bury them in Koppelberg Hill, thirty feet deep where they'll never be found."

"Then they'll go home and cry," said Corin, "and in time they'll realise that they will have to explain away the disappearance of a townful of children."

I nodded. "So they'll invent the Pied Piper, the ratscatcher who came and cleared the town of rats by enticing them into the Weser with his music. When he wasn't paid he stole the children of the town instead and they were never seen again."

Later Christian returned and sat down with us. We watched as a party of frightened men ran towards Koppelberg to begin to dig. Already, said Christian, the story of the Piper from out of town was beginning to be put around, soon the whole legend would take shape.

A good legend and a good story to cover up their crime. In forty years' time they would prefer to forget everything about the events of a spring day in 1270 and even their cover story would be denied.

Christian said, "They'll banish Hansel to the hut on the hill and so frighten him that he will never dare to tell the truth if he's asked, only the fabrication."

Corin nodded. "The legend will persist, because legends always do; this one because a man in Hanover will very soon, now, hear the story and he will believe it is true because he will be told it is true. Then it will be written down for posterity for ever."

Then, in nineteenth-century Germany, it started to rain, and we picked ourselves up and walked across the fields to Koppelberg hill, where a legend vanished into the ground never to be seen again.

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The Flight of the Horse  
by Larry Niven  
Painting by Anthony Roberts  
of Young Artists  
(By courtesy of Orbit Books)







Tactics of Mistake  
by Gordon Dickson  
Painting by Anthony Roberts  
of Young Artists  
(By courtesy of Sphere Books)



# SPACEOUT

'You realise it is an offence  
for a serving astronaut to  
have an emotional-sexual  
relationship with anyone but  
his or her wife or husband'

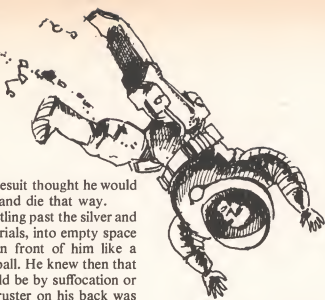
PHILIP BOAST



Perry Rhodan No 5: The Vega Sector  
Painting by Chris Foss  
(By courtesy of Orbit Books)







At first the man in the spacesuit thought he would hit the satellite bomb, and die that way.

He missed it by feet, hurtling past the silver and black casing, the foils and aerials, into empty space again, though Earth hung in front of him like a glaring, huge, blue-green eyeball. He knew then that the manner of his death would be by suffocation or burning. Still the reaction-thruster on his back was jammed and would stay on until the nitrogen was exhausted. He knew what that meant. Although he was still alive, he was a dead man.

Far behind him already, in the *Charlie Brown*, Ben was still talking to the Cape, his voice calm and cold, the way they liked it, emotionless, computerised.

'Kelloran's Beta-two-zero has failed to close down.'

*Kelloran is a dead man*. That was what he was saying. Kelloran is going to die. Out there in the sunlit dark, alone, spinning round the world, round and round — he was going to die.

'I repeat, his Beta-two-zero has failed to close down.'

Ben wouldn't come after him. No pilot would; well maybe Sellers, but he was on the moon. He'd written. Growing T-bone steaks after bending someone's precious shuttle once too often. So they'd put him in hydroponics, tending the farm.

Kelloran stared at the approaching Earth. Now he was going to buy a proper farm. A trillion years of death stretched in front of him. He tried to think religious thoughts and was surprised to feel only an aching in his loins.

□ On the *Charlie Brown*, Ben Newman pressed the transmit.

'Kelloran?'

'I hear you.'

'Your Beta-two-zero. Any idea what caused the fault?'

'No.'

'Oh ... design fault? Production failure?'

'Who wants to know?'

'Cape.'

Kelloran said, 'Tell them to bugger off.'

Simultaneously the thrust against his back died, the tank was empty. He rolled over and stared back at a million parsecs of space and stars. Nothing. No capsule; even the bomb was invisible. He opened his pouch, let the servicing equipment drift out, threw it from him. Twenty thousand dollars' worth of glittering rubbish. Somebody else would have to service their bomb now. He pressed the transmit.

'Ben? What's your fuel position?'

He listened, staring blindly at Earth again.

'Sorry, Kelloran. I'm into reserve already.'

'I'm not that far away, you know. You could still come and get me.'

'Sorry, Kelloran.'

'Ben? Please.'

No answer. They were too close to Earth's atmosphere for safe rescue now. Though Sellers would've done it, But Newman wasn't Sellers.

□ Carey thumbed through the papers on his desk, the routine emergencies of a normal day. Someone on the TWA clipper to Imbrium Base had a coronary and in the *Gustav Holst* on the Mars' run a fuel cell had blown. He rubbed his glasses. Neither of those things would be his responsibility — not if he played his cards right, they wouldn't. But Kelloran. Kelloran was his problem. He lifted the phone.

'Get Mrs Kelloran down here.'

Of course the man was going to die. There was nothing anyone could do; but telling that to the wives, trying to make them understand, was such a nasty job. And they always tried to blame someone, even got emotional sometimes.

'Mrs Kelloran.' His secretary closed the door behind her.

She said, 'How is he?'

Carey noticed she was young, and pretty. Good

breeding stock too, fine teeth. Kelloran was a lucky man.

'He's all right at the moment. But I'm afraid ...' He shook his head.

He watched the tears well in her eyes. He helped her into a seat. While she sobbed he ordered coffee. Then he cleaned his glasses on a tissue, finding her display of feeling embarrassing.

□ In *Charlie Brown* Ben Newman rechecked his fuel levels. It was no go. The notion of rescuing Lee Kelloran on the ten per cent reserve was tempting, but he dismissed it as romantic. When men went into space they knew the risks they took.

Of course, it was a pity Kelloran's thruster had jammed. He had not disliked the man, although Kelloran's humour was sometimes a little too earthy for his taste, his language a little ... basic, but he had known his job and had therefore been an adequate partner.

Well, somebody else would have to service the orbital bomb now. He couldn't do it alone. Newman sighed as he punched in the co-ordinates for the Wheel. Involuntarily he glanced towards the crescent of Earth: Kelloran was down there, spiralling silently to a fiery death.

As the main motor fired Newman felt a twinge — a lesser or greater man would have recognised it as guilt.

□ Of course he could have ended it, any time, by un-latching his helmet. Yet, although he had risked death many times, he was reluctant to die. He was afraid, but he had always been afraid, and he and fear had fought death together. He could not release the latches voluntarily; he could not invite death to take him. He could not give up.

Yet there was nothing he could do.

He thought of Elvira, of her supple, brown body, and the pale places on that body. He could not rid himself of thoughts of sex and reached out and grasped the image of her, but it was only vacuum and, on Earth's face, all the land and sea from Singapore to the western Sahara; he closed his arms, and crushed Cairo between finger and thumb.

He'd had a good time over all, betting money, getting stewed, laying broads and making friends — social, emotional, sexual. Of course, WSA had only approved of, and therefore been told about, the social side. As far as they knew his only emotional contact was with his wife, Christine.

Laughing, the dead man tumbled toward Earth and death — still laughing.

□ At World Space Headquarters Driver looked at the figures again — they were fantastic, but true because the computers said they were true. He sat back in his seat and glanced at the passionless face of the Air Force major. The figures translated a simple situation into a highly complex one; a whole new range of problems.

'That's right,' said the major. 'He's heading straight in the window. Before, his options were either bouncing off the atmosphere into space again, or coming in too fast and burning up ...'

'I know that,' said Driver. He stared at the figures again. 'I've had the President on my back.'

The major said, 'There's a sixty per cent chance he'll survive re-entry. That's an armoured suit, Mr Driver.'

'The media?'

'It's out.'

Driver nodded. 'Naturally, or the President

wouldn't be interested. But even if this man does survive re-entry, he'll still be killed when he hits the ground.' The phone rang. 'Yes?' He waved the major away. 'Good morning, Madam President ...'

□ Carey sipped his coffee sitting on the edge of his desk, watching the girl cry. She was obviously genuinely affected, but she did seem very young. Kelloran was 43; he'd been married fifteen years. Well, the girl could only have been 16 or 17 then. An extraordinary situation, yet he recalled no particular mention of it in Kelloran's dossier. There should be. It could indicate a psychological abnormality.

His secretary spoke on the intercom. 'I have Mrs Kelloran here ...'

Carey went to the door. Mrs Kelloran was about 40, dressed in blue, with cool features and dark hair. He stared at her.

She said, 'My husband is in some trouble, I believe.'

Carey said, 'Do you have a daughter?'

'Yes, I do.'

'How old?'

'She's 13 on 4th September.'

Carey slammed the door, strode across his office and hauled the girl, who was sobbing, to her feet.

He shook her. 'So who the hell are you?'

She dabbed her eyes, but smiled with a kind of bravado. 'My name is Elvira.'

Driver phoned, he said, 'About Kelloran. We're going to try a rescue.'

Carey shouted, 'I have his wife here — and his mistress!'

Driver said distantly, 'Direct orders of the President. We attempt a rescue. Mistress, did you say? Good Lord. Is that in his psychological profile? An astronaut with a mistress?'

□ Although he tried to think profound and sincere thoughts about religion and his family, Kelloran found they would not come. He tried to remember the church where he had become married to Christine, but the church dissolved into a gambling den in Pasadena where he'd won and lost a lot of money. He thought of Christine but she dissolved into Elvira — Elvira when they'd met and first made love by a quiet Canadian lake. Yet death was serious, a very grave occasion. It seemed irrelevant to meet it clutched and mumbling at erotic fantasies.

For the first time the suit-ground radio stirred to life. 'Kelloran?'

'What do you want?'

'How do you feel?'

'Great.'

'We think you may have a chance. What's your status on oxygen?'

So they thought they could save him. He smiled cynically. Obviously a political move. A person died in space once every ten days on average; it wasn't that big an event. But no one had gone this way before, surviving an atmosphere re-entry. So the politicians thought they could save him. OK, so maybe he would survive re-entry and maybe the computers could track him accurately enough to predict his point of impact. Sure, but he'd still hit the ground at over a hundred miles an hour. What did they plan to do about that, catch him in a bedsheet?

'Don't think you're being realistic, CapCon. That'd annoy them.'

'We are always realistic,' said CapCon coldly. 'Please confine your comments to data, not opinions.'

'Hey, could you do me a favour?'

'Explain.'

'Put me through to Sellers, would you? Pilot Sellers. I want to chat.'

'Where is he?'

'The moon, Janssen Base.'

There was silence while they patched him through. He stared at the face of the world. It moved very quickly now. He was across South Africa in a few deep breaths.

'Lee?' Sellers' voice was faint, lot of background.

'Hi, Jamie. How's the farm?'

'Oh shit, Lee, how are you? What's happening?'

'Bit of trouble here. Look, if I don't ... you know ... see Elvira for me will you ... tell her ...'

His voice trailed off. 'Jamie?'

The faceless voice of the operator. 'Caller, this

communication has been ended due to the use of improper language.'

Nothing. An anonymous statute had denied him his last request.

□ Carey shouted, 'Tom, he ain't worth the trouble!' Driver said, 'Let's not get emotional about this, Tony.'

'I'm not Tony,' said Carey. 'I'm Frank.'

'OK - Frank. Sure, we've found out a few things about Kelloran and we'll have to run a psychological

section, two men stepped in front of Jamie Sellers to block his way.

'Pilot Officer Sellers?'

'You're holding me up, boys. I'm due on duty in ...' Sellers glanced at his watch '... just over a minute.'

'It can wait. What's your connection with Engineer Kelloran?'

Sellers shrugged. 'We're friends, that's all.'

'How long have you known him?'

'Since we were kids.'

'You like him?'

'Sure.' Sellers moved forward but they stopped him. 'Say, what is this?'

'Kelloran's in trouble. There's going to be an official enquiry. Behaviour unfitting an astronaut.'

'Kelloran's a good man. You know that.'

'We're just doing our job,' said the two men.

'Astronauts are human beings,' said Sellers, but he could see they didn't believe him. Oh, they'd come to the moon, those two, but they'd never looked out the window. On Earth they wore in underground complexes wearing freshly laundered shirts, and in the evenings they watched television.

not answer. He shrugged and wrote an unflattering estimation.

'Your relationship with Lee Kelloran?'

'I'm his mother.'

'Relationship: lover.' The clerk stared through her.

'Kelloran is in trouble. He has concealed an emotional immaturity likely to affect his work. That is not an oversight, it is an offence.'

She said quietly, 'Lee is a very good engineer indeed.'

'But secretive, and therefore subject to forces we know nothing about, and therefore unpredictable.'

'That's a human being!'

'That is not relevant. The World Space Agency does not require human beings, but astronauts.'

'You're a ... little man. A little man.'

Elvira stared angrily at him, into the clerk's cold plastic gaze. Suddenly the clerk looked away and belched. He coloured. She heard his stomach bubbling as he rushed red-faced from the room, and she sat back and laughed. She started to cry. They were going to try and rescue Lee Kelloran; some would risk their lives for him, but they felt no more affection for him than for a unit of defective electronics.



re-evaluation, but I have my orders. The media are interested in Kelloran. We've not lost any personnel quite this way before and it's caught their imagination. The word is: get that man down alive.'

'But it's not worth the trouble,' groaned Carey. 'If he was an Asquith or a Kowalski, sure; but he's maladjusted, he's a misfit. He's concealed the relationship he had with the girl Elvira from us - and God knows what else. I'll tell you, Tom, I've got the boys out in Pasadena and they're really digging up the dirt.'

□ In a degrading orbit, already imagining he could feel the first faint buffets of atmosphere, Kelloran spoke with his wife.

'Hallo, darling.'

'Hallo, Lee.'

'How are the kids?'

'They're staying with my parents over the weekend.'

'But how are they?'

'I presume they're all right. I've had no messages. I'm sure they send you their love.'

Abruptly Kelloran broke contact. To say he hated his wife would be to overstate her importance to him. No, he felt only a mild though profound dislike for her.

CapCon spoke. 'Kelloran, you're under a strain and we are aware of that, but you forgot to tell your wife you loved her.'

'That's my business.'

'Fraid not, Kelloran. We made a tape of your conversation there, it's going out over the six o'clock news. Tell your wife you love her, Kelloran, it looks better.'

Kelloran gritted his teeth. 'Go to hell.'

CapCon sighed. 'OK, Kelloran, we can graft it on anyway.'

Cut.

□ In Janssen Base, in a corridor to the hydroponics

□ As far as he could tell he was over the Urals now but down there it was cloudy, probably snowing, windy and cold as hell. In the suit it was warm, not too warm. Kelloran was thinking of his dog. He wasn't a pedigree dog but he was his own dog and he had a great affection for the mutt, especially as he held Kelloran's wife in the same cordial disdain that Kelloran did. The dog was one of Kelloran's real friends. Not all the men he'd met - or women, reflected Kelloran - were as human as that dog. Certainly not most of the husbands and wives on the WSA estate where he had his house. Spacemen couldn't afford to be individual and imaginative human beings the Agency had found, they tended to catch a religious revelation too easily and become non-functional. Occasionally a rogue slipped through the net though, a Sellers or a Kelloran. However, the shrinks were getting more perceptive every week. The newcomers to WSA were mostly stamped out from the same factory - cold, collected, calm and voiceless; and truthful, they'd go back to the shrink for a checkup if they found themselves actually enjoying a cigar after dinner.

The sad truth, thought Kelloran, was that WSA had been putting men in space for half a century, but they hadn't sent a poet up once, even he had never thought of that as important before.

□ He said, 'Your name?'

He did not frighten her, this motionless-but-for-the-eyes-and-pen clerk.

'Elvira,' she said proudly.

'Your full name?'

'Elvira,' she repeated.

His fish eyes studied her briefly.

'Elvira Doe,' he said, and wrote it.

'Please yourself,' she said.

'Your date of birth?'

'That is not your business.'

'It is all my business, there is nothing about you that is not my business. Your date of birth?' She did



□ In the dark valley between the giant mountains they had all danced together under the coloured lights until dawn faded the blaze of stars. It had been cold then, cold in the glass-grey pre-dawn and the music had died and left them standing in the vast silence hearing the water toppling down the rocky stream while the sun rose, slowly. And so it had ended.

As he rushed now out of the cold Antarctic night the sun lunged from the rim of the world like a shooting flare and he had time to remember that other night and other dawn before the atmosphere hit him in the guts like a blow. The air was almost vacuum-thin but it was like a solid wall. Then suddenly he was in clear space again, spinning, breathless, but in one piece.

He hit atmosphere again over Arctic wastes and again bounced, but he was slowing down - as the computers had predicted.

Driver sat in his padded chair and watched, on the



scenes that covered one wall, the whole gigantic operation beginning to unfold. Had he been instructed to think about it, the scale of the rescue would have staggered him. Obviously the cost of it was equally enormous, as the accountants had pointed out to him, but he had simply referred them to the Pentagon.

It was probable Kelloran would fall into the ocean somewhere between ten and three hundred miles south to south-west of Cape Town. Already the supersonic transports were in the air, the men ready, the ships and hovercraft standing by. Once men would have called it all fantastic, but Driver only nodded quietly to himself. As he had planned, the operation was proceeding efficiently.

□ 'This is all most unfortunate,' said Carey.

'I cannot help but agree,' said Mrs Kelloran.

'You had no suspicion of the existence of the woman, Elvira?'

'None.'

'Your sexual relations with Mr Kelloran were normal?'

'Perfectly. We made love in the attic bedroom after the religious programmes every Sunday.'

'So you had no reason to suspect another woman.'

'That's right. I never imagined.'

'Naturally she will be escorted from the base immediately.'

'How kind.'

Carey said delicately, 'And if your husband survives, will you take him back?'

'Naturally. Of course I shall impose certain conditions. The woman Elvira must go, also a certain old armchair he keeps by the fire to snore in during the evenings, and I will insist he have his moth-eaten old dog put to sleep.'

'You realise it is an offence for a serving astronaut to have an emotional-sexual relationship with anyone but his or her wife or husband. Will you require us to take disciplinary action in this matter?'

Mrs Kelloran stood up. 'No,' she said. 'I will be doing that myself.'

□ The image flashed through Kelloran's mind of a cartoon cat caught in a spin drier that he had seen on a children's programme — that was how he felt. The stars were gone now, a swollen Earth twisted and whirled around him, swirled with sunlight and multicolours, then span into the dark again. As he tumbled in the thin burning air the G-forces beat his head from side to side in his helmet. Then for the last time he was in clear space again.

'Kelloran?'

He was too breathless to answer.

'Kelloran, the main danger during your final re-entry will be heat, and while we estimate your suit may not be seriously damaged, you must not expect your refrigerating unit to be able to cope. Secondly, the problem of aerodynamic instability ...'

'I know all about that,' he said.

'You must try to present an equal and balanced surface to the atmosphere, Kelloran.'

Into the dawn, Kelloran looked at the riot of colour rushing beneath him, above him, around him as he span, and closed his eyes. At that moment he would have given a lot for a little understanding.

□ Driver turned from the screens and humming computer consoles, the printouts and remorselessly growing piles of figures and numbers and data in the cool air-conditioned control room and stared at the glass cage containing the newsmen.

In there it would be noisy with an atmosphere of excitement and drama, even panic. He could see their mouths working, the sweat shining on their faces. They were up there with Kelloran, feeling the thin air slash at them, the growing heat. It seemed very false to Driver, the creation for the viewers and readers of a dramatic and exciting rescue operation which was in fact not dramatic or exciting at all — merely an attempt to prevent the death of a man who had cost a lot to train, although, if Carey was to be believed, a man who should never have been an astronaut in the first place.

He turned from the newsmen with a professional's dispassionate contempt for earthbound amateurs and sensation-mongers.

□ He was somewhere over Antarctica again, arms and legs outstretched. Although he had dropped the glare visors on his helmet they were glowing now, the fierce heat radiating into his face. He moved his head and dimly saw his right hand, the glove fluorescent and burning-blue with wraiths of gas flame, the outer layers browning and charring then stripped away by the supersonic gale too fast for the eye to see. He felt crushed to death, unable to breathe, and the suit was filling with steam as the cooling system ruptured. Momentarily there was a beating like hammers as the radio aerials began to tear loose, then they were gone. A man wrapped in flame, ice-blue, orange, and gold, he tore like a meteor across the face of the far sub-zero sky.

Driver: *We appear to have lost radio contact.*

Carey: *Would you care for a cup of coffee, Mrs Kelloran? The item is decelerating at the predicted rate.*

He screamed into his radio but there was no answer. His body was burning up and he called for Elvira but they could not hear him — anyone she had already been escorted from the base. She sat in her car in the vast anonymous carpark listening to the bulletins slipped in between the discs and chat shows. Above her even the sky was cloudy.

Driver: *We have his position. SST7 at fifty thousand can reach him.*

Carey: *This is the tricky part, Mrs Kelloran.*

Mrs Kelloran: *Will the burning disfigure him permanently?*

Driver: *Maybe SST12 at thirty thousand can also rendezvous. Afterburner problem. Re-entry of item completed. Vertical descent attained.*

Now he was falling, the heat was gone and the cold ate at him. The glare visors were charred and twisted, useless. He jetisoned them, but still the sea and the coast of Africa far away was blurred by the steam congealing as ice on the faceplate. The cold twisted at his burned flesh with fingers of sand and as he fell at maybe only a thousand miles an hour he could feel stripped layers of his suit flapping like wings.

Driver: *His position is now accurately pinpointed. Rate of descent nine hundred and eighty and decreasing ...*

The ice on his faceplate cleared and the sea was a smooth blue sheet, impossible to say how far below, but he could no longer see Africa. He could hear the muted roaring of the wind; he was the first true sky-diver.

Carey: *Rate of descent six hundred twenty-five ...*

In front of his face a red light was flashing beside the faceplate. He was on oxygen reserve. It gave him half an hour.

Driver: *Assuming a spreadeagle position, his terminal speed at sea level in that suit is one hundred seventeen miles per hour. Survival?*

Carey: *Negative.*

Across the sea a silver delta was crawling, towing a long white vapour trail. He recognised it for a plane. For the first time he felt a faint hope.

Driver: *SST7 moving into position. They're ready now. Fifty thousand feet.*

In his faceplate the aeroplane grew and grew as he fell towards it, then suddenly it was gone and he had only a momentary impression of a succession of black dots leaping through the rear doors. So that was how they were going to do it.

Carey: *The operation is still proceeding according to plan.*

The black dots resolved into orange-suited men as they swooped head first towards him, lessening their air resistance so as to catch him up as quickly as possible. He smiled at them, but their faces were expressionless. One of them grabbed his arm.

Driver: *They have contact with him. The suit's in bad shape but Kelloran's alive. They're attaching the flotation ring now.*

Carey: *That suit weighs two hundred pounds in Earth gravity, Mrs Kelloran. Without the flotation ring he would sink immediately on hitting the sea.*

The flotation ring was a long empty bladder that flapped and lashed in the airstream like a mad thing. Somehow they got it round his shoulders, stretching it around the bulky systems unit on his back. The orange men were clustered about him now like moths around a light. They had a parachute for him and tried to strap it to his front but someone's shoulder hit the compressed air switch and the flotation ring in-

flated with a bang. Increased air resistance snatched Kelloran up; the orange men fell impotently away below him and disappeared.

Carey: *Damn that man to hell.*

Driver: *It's up to SST12 now, and they won't have much time. He'll be under thirty thousand any moment.*

Though hope had been snatched from him, hope was born again. With icy nerve the pilot in the supersonic transport passed only a few hundred yards from him and Kelloran again saw the black dots pour from the rear doors and resolve into orange men. He glanced down: he was close enough to see the ocean wrinkled and flecked with white.

Driver: *They've made contact but they're running out of height fast.*

They pressed the parachute to his front and tried to do it up but the rush of air was so strong that they could hardly hold the straps. It seemed they'd never be able to do it up in time. They were so low now that he could see the horizon moving in. The straps on the parachute weren't long enough to tie up behind the systems unit. Suddenly there was a loud flapping as all but one of the orange men opened the parachutes and soared out of sight. Kelloran's parachute pack tore loose. The remaining man was signalling to him. Carey: *We're going to lose him. They've under a thousand feet of altitude ...*

Driver: *They can't say we haven't tried.*

It took Kelloran a moment to understand, then he slid forward against the pressure of the air and wrapped his arms around the orange man's waist. They were very close to the sea.

Driver: *Five hundred feet. We've lost him.*

The man pulled his ripcord and Kelloran heard the pilot parachute snap open and though they were close enough to the ocean to see the waves moving, he felt no fear, only a final resignation to death, a last farewell to Elvira. Then the main parachute opened with a jerk that nearly tore him loose and there were long moments of unbearable strain ...

□ Kelloran opened his eyes, slowly, slowly. A terrible pain unfolded in his body but the flotation ring buoyed him high in the sea. He was alive, rising and falling in the rhythmic blue heartbeat of the long slow swell. He was alive.

In the water in front of him the body of the man in orange floated face down. Kelloran splashed clumsily to it, turned the man over. His face was as reposed in death as it had been in life. Kelloran stared at him for a long time, then slowly took him in his arms.

'One of your units has become non-functional,' he choked to a world that could not hear.

□ 'Naturally you cannot stay with the Agency, but we will not be billing you for the cost of the rescue.'

'How generous,' said Kelloran.

Driver said, 'It was not my decision.'

Kelloran looked at Elvira and smiled. 'You know I'm divorcing my wife?' he asked Driver.

'Since you are no longer a member of the Agency, that does not concern us. Of course we shall pay your pension to her. Not that you care. With what you'll set your story for to the fax agencies ...'

'Do I hear a note of envy?'

'Of course not.' Driver showed them to the door of his functional but bare and depressing office. As they were about to go Driver stopped them and there really was a note of envy in his voice now. 'Kelloran, how do you do it? There's a whole world out there that's finely balanced on a knife-edge of political and commercial intrigue. Doesn't the responsibility of being ... a man, Kelloran, a citizen, a human being ... doesn't it worry you? The precision with which that world's got to be handled. What's your secret? Doesn't it worry you?'

Kelloran smiled again and wrapped his arm comfortably around Elvira's shoulder. He knew Driver would never understand.

'I live,' he said. 'I am alive.'

Driver only looked blank. Kelloran and Elvira left the building. They had bought a farm with real chickens and cows. As they crossed the road they were nearly run down by a computerised car which did not sense them due to a jammed solenoid and several unconnected transistors.

A Review of: **The Man Who Fell to Earth**, or: **The Film Reviewer Who Fell to His Seat**, by John Brosnan

If somebody wanted to be really nasty about *The Man Who Fell to Earth* he could describe it as the 'thinking man's *Space 1999*'. This is because both of them have absolutely nothing to do with science fiction but *pretend* they do; they exploit the themes and devices of SF for reasons entirely their own. In the case of *Space 1999* the reason is to make money for Sir Lewis Grade and Gerry Anderson; in the case of *The Man Who Fell to Earth* it's to add fuel to Nicolas Roeg's reputation as an important film-maker. Now Roeg has made a number of fine films, such as *Performance*, *Walkabout* and *Don't Look Now*, all of which have been rather solid, highly symbolic, full of artistic and literary allusions, multi-layered and rich to the eye. These descriptions equally apply to *The Man...* but with this film Roeg seems to have reached a kind of artistic dead end, as too much of it is self-indulgent and inbred. At times it even seems like a parody of his earlier films, particularly *Performance*, with which it shares many similarities. The sex scenes, for example, employ the same device that was used to such good effect in *Performance* and *Don't Look Now*; that of intercutting the writhing bodies with flashes back and forwards... but because of this repetition it's now only its effectiveness and become merely a Roeg cliché. Other similarities include the sequence where David Bowie and the girl (Candy Clark) play with a revolver full of blanks; a direct reference to the scene in *Performance* where James Fox shoots Mick Jagger. And, as in *Performance*, a parting provides the symbolic key to the whole film (in *Performance* it was a portrait of the writer Borges; in *The Man...* it's a painting showing the fall of Icarus).

*The Man Who Fell to Earth* is the story of a nice young man, or something (read *Angel*), from Up There (read *Paradise*) who comes down to Earth on a special mission and becomes corrupted by a steady diet of gin, sex and other Earthly vices, such as television. To confuse the issue, various science fiction elements are added: we have flashbacks to a desert world where the alien staggers over sand dunes accompanied by his wife (or husband?) and their two children; all of them dressed in costumes familiar to any comic-book fan. The alien then enters a construction that resembles a haystack with sails which is apparently the means by which he travels to earth — it's some sort of space-time machine. His mission on Earth, we later learn, is to utilise Earth's resources somehow in an attempt to bring water to his dry and dying world. Of course, logically it seems likely that a civilisation capable of sending a being through time and space by means of a haystack with sails could probably accomplish anything, including the manufacture of water. But logic is definitely not what Roeg's film is about. On the contrary, it is more about the inability of logical man to cope with something that is plainly illogical. At least, that's one explanation of what the film is about, but there are others. For example, the scriptwriter, Paul Mayersberg, said, *'The Man Who Fell to Earth* is much more about the mystery of love than the mystery of the universe.'

That's just *his* opinion. I haven't read the novel it's based on, by Walter Tevis, but I understand it's a straightforward SF story — something the film definitely is *not*. It doesn't have a linear narrative construction but consists of a series of almost unconnected fragments that dart back and forth through time and space. It's a confusing film in many ways, perhaps unnecessarily so; it's certainly not the sort of film that you can sit back with and let wash over you — you've got to work at it. Visually it's breath-taking. Roeg was a top cameraman before he turned to directing and his talent for striking composition remains unimpaired. In this film he has been well complemented by lighting cameraman Anthony Richmond.

Also on the credit side of *The Man...* is the cast: David Bowie as the alien, alias Thomas Newton, looks perfect in the part with his pale skin and delicate bone structure. Unfortunately, due to his lack of acting experience, he doesn't know how to use his voice to good effect; the result is that when he speaks he invariably detracts from the alien image that he has created so well visually. Candy Clark, as the girl Newton becomes involved with, is very good, starting off as a warm and friendly teenager with a liking of alcohol and finishing up as a disillusioned middle-aged alcoholic. Rip Torn as a scientist is magnetic as ever but gives the impression he's not sure what he's doing — except in the sex scenes. More effective is Buck Henry, a homosexual patents lawyer who helps Newton to build his vast financial empire and who is finally eliminated by the Establishment. Henry's death scene is one of the most chilling I've seen in a movie for a long time. Roeg captures perfectly the horrifying impersonality of the professional killers; men who are performing an intimate act on another human being!.

But for all its visual beauty, its density and the quality of the performances, I must repeat that *The Man...* is something of a failure. Roeg attempted to achieve too much in one film and in the end he achieved too little (no doubt whole issues of *Sight and Sound* will be devoted to trying to explain just what he did achieve). Ironically, in a film that was inspired by the label of science fiction, the sequence that most impressed me was pure SF! It was the sequence where Newton drove through the American countryside in his huge, black limousine and saw a colonial homestead appear in a field that was empty moments before. And the homesteaders also saw, and were amazed by, Newton's vehicle as it passed by before disappearing into a ball of light. That's marvellous 'sense of wonder' stuff that the cinema does so well when it wants to.

The other big fault with *The Man* is that it is much too long. By the end of its two hours and twenty minutes I felt distinctly bored, having endured a visual and conceptual 'over-kill'. When, in the film's final scene, a waiter, referring to the number of drinks that Newton has consumed, says, 'I think Mr Newton has had enough', I found myself agreeing wholeheartedly.

#### Something Old, Something New

Yes, dear readers, we've come to the end of the road and this will be the last issue of *Science Fiction*

*Monthly*. However, do not despair, all is not lost: in a matter of a few weeks you'll be able to buy an even better science fiction magazine called *SF Digest*. The first issue will appear in mid May and regularly from then on at three monthly intervals. It will contain all that's good about *SFM* and avoid all that's bad. For a start it will be half of *SFM*'s page size, so you won't find it difficult to handle, but there will be many more pages. The fiction will be of a very high standard — for instance, the first issue includes stories by Brian Aldiss, Robert Silverberg and Michael Coney — and there won't be so much emphasis on factual articles, although there will always be one in every issue. The amount of colour artwork will be much reduced, but there will be a full-colour, pull-out poster free with every issue. All the stories will be illustrated and great pains have been, and will be, taken to make sure that all the illustrations fit the stories they accompany. John Brunner has written an editorial and there are consumer guides to Heinlein, Van Vogt and Asimov as well as a quiz. *SF Digest* will be available at newsagents and bookstalls from mid May and will cost 50p.

#### Chris Foss Strikes Again!

Chris Foss is one of the most popular artists working in England today and from the look of his collection *Science Fiction Art* (just published by Hart-Davis, MacGibbon) it's not difficult to see why. The very large book (in format it's bigger than *SFM*) contains ten full-colour Foss originals which are printed on one side of the page only, so it's possible to use them as posters. Brian Aldiss has written the introduction and the book should be available from all good booksellers; price £1.95.

#### Nasty Rumours

A new American SF magazine, probably to be called *Odyssey Science Fiction*, is being edited by Roger Elwood. It will be the same size as *Time* magazine, contain eighty pages and sell for \$1. The lead story in the first issue will be 'Bind Your Sons to Evil' by Jerry Pournelle... The Science Fiction Foundation plans to sponsor an award for science fiction criticism. The first award will cover work published during 1974-75. Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven are writing four more books together. These include *Inferno*, which was serialised in *Galaxy*, *Lucifer's Hammer* and *Oath of Fealty*... Futura Books are to publish *Mote in God's Eye* and Corone Books will publish Robert Silverberg's *Unfamiliar Territory*... Michael Joseph have in hand a biography of Mervyn Peake by John Watney to be published later this year... Paramount are planning to film *Megalopolis*, the story of a city whose life-support systems collapse; it is based on a novel by Roberto Vacca. Paramount are also planning a black comedy about a world economic crisis caused by the Shah of Iran and ending in a nuclear disaster. It will be called *The Crash of '79* and produced by Al Ruddy... Steven Spielberg of *Jaws* fame is working on a film called *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* which is based on one of his short stories... After *Bug* and *Phase IV* we'll soon be able to see *Squirm*, concerning an invasion of worms, and *The Giant Spider Invasion* which speaks for itself...

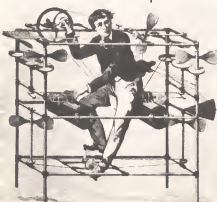
## New SF

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MONTHLY

Photograph  
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The Darkness on Diamondia  
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THE SF NOVELS  
OF  
D G COMPTON  
PETER LINNETT



The Continuous Kathleen Mortenhoe  
By D G Compton  
Painting by David Bergen  
(By courtesy of Arrow Books)



D G Compton is a new kind of sf writer. His concerns are new to sf, he owes nothing to the pulp tradition, and the outlook which informs his work is shared by few other sf writers. Here, I believe, lies a clue to the paradox surrounding his work. In my opinion, and that of a good many critics, Compton is one of the best sf novelists writing today, yet, for all the attention his work has received, he might as well not be writing at all. Happily, the situation seems to be improving, but until now his novels have not been widely reviewed, and have sold poorly, with the result that many sf readers seem not even to have heard of him. All this despite the fact that he's maintained a steady, tremendously good output ranging from *The Quality of Mercy* (1965) to *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* (1974) – eight novels in which he has succeeded in both creating a clearly delineated, recognisable world of his own and establishing a sharply-flavoured, individual style. Most important, he possesses a mastery of characterisation far in advance of most other sf writers I can think of.

Why the neglect? Certainly Compton is at the opposite pole to the writer of hardcore sf, in style, approach and technique. His main concerns are with his characters, which are among the most credible in sf, and with the working out of the moral problems arising from the situations in which they find themselves. As Mark Adlard, writing in *Vector* 66, said:

"At the most basic level he is perhaps the first sf writer to continue that tradition of moral seriousness which runs from Austen to James."

It's easy to see why traditionally-minded readers, reared on sf containing indestructible heroes with no scruples whatever, are repelled by Compton's novels: they bring them too close to the real world which much sf ignores. The fact that Compton's moral seriousness is always contained within the framework of a good story well told, and never becomes obtrusive or didactic, is a tribute to his skill as a novelist. The combination makes him a writer of considerable importance.

The first point to make itself obvious on reading his work is that he uses the themes, trappings and symbols of sf because they happen to suit the expression of his personal vision, and aid the statement he wants to make, not because he grew up with the genre or has any great love for it. His first sf novel, *The Quality of Mercy* (1965; revised 1970), was written with little knowledge of previous work in the genre and, indeed, with no awareness that he was writing sf at all.

The novel is set in 1979; its hero, Donald, is a RAF officer seconded to an American airbase in the west country. He acts as navigator on the missions flown to Russia from the base – supposedly to distribute devices to detect Russian missiles as they leave the country. Gradually, awareness of their real purpose begins to seep in: millions of people all over the world are dying of 'Van der Plank's disease' and the dropping of the devices represents the turning of the Cold War into something horrifyingly hot. But Donald persists in deliberately ignoring the facts, despite the efforts of his wife and one of his friends.

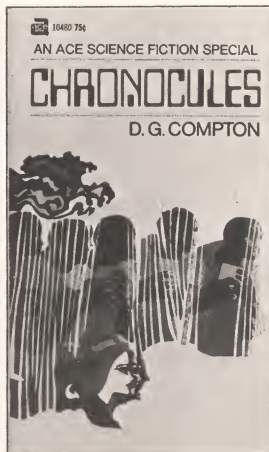
From the beginning we are made aware of Donald's attitude, which is connected to his Englishness (many of Compton's characters share typically English qualities such as reticence, a sense of duty, hatred of pretentiousness):

Donald had a job to do, what his American superiors portentously called a 'mission'. He got on with it. Not letting the things that mattered worry him was probably his most valuable ability. It was probably what had got him through the selection board.

Like all Compton's novels, *The Quality of Mercy* explores the reaction of ordinary people to an extraordinary situation. In the earlier books the characters go under; in the later ones, they gain a victory of a sort, even though terrible things happen to them. The book is also noteworthy for introducing several preoccupations which are to reappear in the later novels: a consciousness of class and, indeed, of anything that is 'different'; a marriage breaking up under the impact of the situation; and the presentation of a future England in which tolerance, civility and the other things which make life bearable are rapidly disappearing, to be replaced by repression, cynicism and bitterness. Compton's presentation of



KARL THRE



his imagined future sometimes seems extreme; but look around you – the roots of many of the things he writes about are already present.

It's interesting that Compton should go on writing sf after this book, more or less discovering the themes he dealt with by himself (see the accompanying interview), thus helping to bring credibility and sophistication to the genre. What we see in the development of Compton's work is a writer bringing all the style and treatment of a mainstream novelist to bear on themes traditionally associated with sf. That the themes had been used before is undeniable; but they had rarely been used in novels of such depth and humanity. It was obvious that Compton was bringing something quite new to sf.

His next novel, *Farewell, Earth's Bliss* (1966) is set on Mars. Again, Compton is not primarily interested in the mechanics of the theme he has chosen: a group of social outcasts and political deportees being sent to a colony for undesirables on the red planet. His concern is with the reaction of his characters. There's Jacob, a young, frightened Negro; Ruth, who becomes involved with the governor of the settlement; and Mark, the leader on board ship. It might be hard to see the colony as a Utopia, as Compton suggests it is, but its harsh, simple life is obviously preferable to the overcrowded, conformist one back on Earth:

There would be work. Sleeping and waking. There would be books. The sun would rise and set. Clouds and some small vegetation. Human companionship. The range of life did not have to be vast for it to be worth living.

Glimmers of hope are always scattered throughout Compton's novels; despite the characters' bitterness, and the fact that most of them can think back to better times, their lives are never presented as unremittably harsh.

In *Farewell, Earth's Bliss*, Mars is not presented through the rose-coloured glasses of Bradbury and E R Burroughs. Hence the deportees' first glimpse of their new environment:

The sunlight hurt his eyes. It might have been greener than sunlight on Earth, but he lacked any absolute by which to judge it. The desert stretched away in front of him in diagonal step-like ridges perhaps a hundred feet high to the distant horizon precariously steep like the edge of a big ball. The dust was dry and dead, scamed with yellow and black on the cut cliff faces of the ridges. And between the red horizon and the aching sun there was nothing but cold. Cold he could feel now through the soles of his shoes, cold that scorched the desert naked and dry, cold that screamed in the ancient stillness...

Nobody spoke. The consciousness of the group centred in a horror for which there were no words. The prospect was scaring. Wordless. It was theirs.

Compton's later novels continue to use what are sometimes standard sf themes in the service of his own ideas. *The Silent Multitude* (1967) is his version of the disaster novel, in which Gloucester – which by the 1980s has become a planned, glossy example of the 'new brutality' – is suddenly evacuated. Soon the city is deserted except for the novel's four characters. Eventually we discover the reason for the evacuation: the city's buildings are beginning to crumble under the impact of a spore unwittingly

introduced by a returning planetary expedition. The characters – a bishop, a tramp, a journalist and the son of the city's architect – are as fully realised as ever, but the allegorical implications of the situation (much of the action takes place on Christmas Day!) are too pressing, despite the novel's concrete physical presentation of the city and its concentration on actualities. The four people meet, talk and watch the city die, but the plot seems contrived, and this time the sf element is unnecessary. The basic action could take place anywhere and anytime.

The next three novels deal with a recurring Compton theme (which was present in *The Quality of Mercy*): the threat of science improperly used. It crops up again and again in major or minor form. *Synthajoy* (1968), perhaps Compton's most ambitious and successful novel, is an extremely lucid presentation of the conflict between humanism and the crocodile of science. The first-person narrative by Thea, wife of Edward the visionary scientist who has discovered a means of synthesising intense emotional or physical experience – a master musician playing a favourite piece, the love-making of a uniquely compatible couple, the death of a true believer – tells the story of her collusion with and then opposition to her husband. He becomes a respected man; she is placed in a mental hospital. The world embraces the new invention; it opens pockets of humanity, like Thea, oppose it. Compton handles the first-person mode exceptionally well, we really believe in Thea, and this time the sf element is an integral part of the story. Dehumanisation is made concrete in the form of Synthajoy and as such is far more frightening than any of the traditional sf horrors.

The novel's most memorable scene, which also acts as a summary of the book as a whole, is the one in which Edward and his colleague Tony, with Thea's help, record on 'tape' the emotional and sensual progress of a couple's love-making, which will eventually be made available to the public. The scene comes across as a comedy which, in a way, it is:

Edward and I went down to the van to watch the dials of normality. It was hot and passionate for us out in the recording van. Tony was absorbed in his levels, and he left us nothing to do but watch. All engineer inside his headphones, not human at all. I saw a needle jump, and counted nine times, and a sort of floating one.

'He's counting her ribs,' I said to Edward.

The recording goes on through the successive stages of the couple's love-making. Compton gradually elaborates each character's reaction: Edward's excitement, quite unsalacious, relating only to the success of this 'serious scientific experiment'; Tony's absorption in his equipment; and Thea's laughter at the whole episode. 'Emotion is of the electric soul', she concludes.

*The Electric Crocodile* (1970) is less impressive; Compton marshals the various elements of the plot less confidently and the book doesn't gel as *Synthajoy* did. It concerns an attempt by a group of scientists to control the inevitable march of science, to discourage certain tendencies and encourage others. Compton's point is that the method of control will almost certainly turn out to be worse than its object. Whatever the novel's faults, the computer centre in which the action takes place is totally convincing, as far as one can tell without actually having set foot in one.

The next two novels share Compton's, by then established, virtues but I prefer to pass quickly over them to move on to his most recent work, *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* (1974). *Chronocules* (1970), published in Britain under the extraordinary title *How Wireless Sers, Aspirin Tablets, the Sandpaper Sides of Used Matchboxes and Something that Might Have Been Castor Oil*, represents Compton's stab at the time travel theme which, it seems, will just not lie down and die. The result is far better than most, but the seriousness of Compton's approach is offset – not always profitably – by the gimmicky theme which, with some justification, he can't quite take seriously. *The Missionaries* (1972; English publication 1975) also utilises a somewhat hackneyed of theme – aliens arriving on Earth, in this case in an attempt to convert us to their religion. Again Compton has difficulties; the aliens present themselves in human form and we are not told much about their planet and their way of life. The full implications of the theme are no more than hinted at.

Compton, it seems to me, is at his best when his premises are plausible, which may explain the comparative lack of success of these novels. (*The Missionaries*, however, is notable for its ironic comments of terrestrial missionary activity of the nineteenth century with that of the aliens.)

*The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*, undoubtedly one of Compton's best books to date, contains all the elements which make him such a good writer: very strong characterisation; a clear yet individual prose style; a good, strongly plotted story; and an air of credibility which, despite one or two odd details, is sustained throughout. In Compton's future world – significantly, the locale is not named this time – fatal disease is extremely rare; and when Katherine Mortenhoe contracts 'Gordon's Syndrome' (described as a fatal affliction of the brain cells) she becomes an immediate focus of attention by the media. As the ultimate expression of cinema-verité, a reporter employed by the tv corporation NTV has a miniature camera placed inside his head, so that what he sees the audience sees:

I'd be on my own, with no helpful floor manager to nudge my arm. It was just the challenge I'd been looking for. I'd do Katherine Mortenhoe proud.

He befriends Katherine and proceeds to film her without her knowledge. The reporter's gradual humanisation during the time he is with Katherine and her eventual achievement of a dignified death,

despite all the odds against it, is very moving. In many ways this is Compton's most pessimistic novel – we have little to look forward to if his imagined society comes about – but at the same time he seems to have partially resolved his concern about this aspect of his work: the reporter comes to see that what he is doing is wrong and Katherine dies peacefully, among friends.

Since Compton is unusual among sf writers in concentrating so much on his characters, it might be worthwhile to briefly examine this aspect of his work. His characters are what one remembers, rather than the ideas or the story. Many of them tend towards bitterness or cynicism – usually because, in Barbusse's phrase, they see 'too deep and too much' to be comfortable in their everyday lives. 'It's not true that I'm indifferent to people,' says a character in *The Silent Multitude*. 'I hate them. I hate the awful phoney faces they make.' This is true for many of Compton's characters, who seem to be too worldly-wise for their own good. They're also very English: firstly in that they try to ignore their situation (discretion); secondly in that they eventually try to do something about it (sense of duty); and the setting is almost always English, either London or the west country.

In particular, Compton's characters loathe the pretensions: Maria in *The Quality of Mercy* hates her centrally-heated, air-conditioned home!

with sunken conversation wells and complete home laundries. Carpeted, upholstered, textured, luxurious... sometimes the intensity of her physical well-being made Maria's flesh creep.

The same sentiment is echoed by Abigail in *The Electric Crocodile* (she and her husband are essentially the couple from the earlier book).

The bitterness, admittedly justified, gives a tart, occasionally unpleasant flavour to Compton's novels:

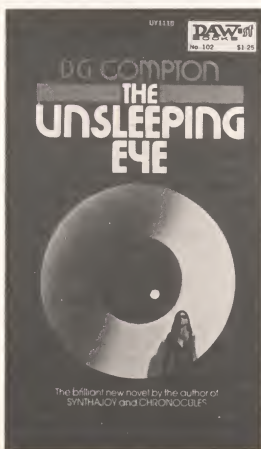
She was thinking how wrong she had been to feel intrigued by David Silberstein. He was nothing. He was neither old-fashioned, nor quiet, nor a father, nor a child. She was looking for a person and he wasn't one. He was just another sexual object.

(*Chronocules*)

There is always an uneasy awareness of the differences between people; characters are forever noting differences of class, bearing, physical appearance and culture. This is hard to illustrate with a quotation, since it provides an undercurrent for many of the novels. But although Compton's heroes may, consciously or otherwise, think of themselves as superior, they are *not* always in the right – sometimes they're obviously in the wrong, as with Donald in *The Quality of Mercy*, Matthew in *The Electric Crocodile*, or Roddie in *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*. One's expectation that Compton will proceed simply to pit the reasonable, humane voice (ie, the protagonist) against the cold, expedient one, is not met because Compton isn't that kind of writer. His novels present complex, uneasy situations which can't be expressed in black and white terms. Because the problems are moral ones, their resolution, if there is a resolution, is always messy and painful for all concerned, because that's the way it happens in real life.

Characterisation is never simple; no one is presented either as a hero or a villain. Compton seems able to get into the heads of an astonishingly wide variety of characters: male and female, intellectuals and idiots, the powerful and the powerless – Vincent Ferriman and Katherine in *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*; Roses Varco and Liza Simmons in *Chronocules*; Gordon Wordsworth in *The Missionaries*; Ruth in *Farewell, Earth's Bliss*. One finishes reading, grateful for having been presented with real, solid people and not cardboard cutouts.

As I have indicated, Compton by no means maintains the same high standard throughout the whole of his work; but even his lesser work offers a good deal more than one is accustomed to finding in sf. Largely unheralded, Compton has quietly gone on working, and we should be grateful that he has done so. There is, of course, a long tradition of mainstream writers using sf for their own purposes; but Compton is the first to do so in book after book, applying his particular vision to work which brings together the best of both worlds. What more can a discerning sf reader ask for? ☺





# SCOP

ROBIN  
DOUGLAS

# J



He was moving back towards the ship, his botanical specimens, precious beyond the lay-mind's conception, safe in the sealed cylinder that hung from his belt. A generous moon stood overhead, causing the trees to throw shadows of bewildering complexity across his path. So many inanimate formations of light and shade ... It took a disciplined mind to disregard them. Vegetable growths that had none of the intuition native to similar growths in other places. They could not even be called uncomprehending witnesses. Like the moon, the trees were blind. He had nothing to fear. Nothing was seeing him. His eyes, swivelling cautiously, tried to penetrate the darkness. He was still young, and feared that one day, in some remote, alien place like this, he might blunder, come face to face with an indigenous Intelligence and be obliged, in the simplest manner he could devise, to kill it. He might use blade or ice or flame, whatever accomplished his purpose without introducing an alien or anachronistic element. Thus the cold dictates of the Cultural Contamination Veto.

At one time, his rear eyes confronted those of an owl. The creature in the tree stared at him. He stood very still. It was a shock to see this wide-eyed thing watching ... but very soon he recalled its species. He'd been told of such eyes as these shining from branches. Witnessing, but not comprehending. There was no need to kill. He moved forward again, this time

with greater caution, but although he progressed slowly over the brittle twigs, he longed to hurry. A barking somewhere in the night alarmed him. He knew the sound was made by a creature that associated with the primitives. Was it very close or some way distant? In this strange atmosphere, he found it difficult to gauge. Also, how loud was the barking at its source? Unable to answer these questions, he wished he'd not wandered so far from his ship. He had no wish to kill any form of intelligence, he felt protective towards these primitives. Earlier in the day, from a carefully chosen vantage point, he had watched some: they came and went from low, fibrous huts, wearing the skins of animals and carrying poles with pointed ends. No, he did not desire to kill. The barking sounded again and now he lumbered forward, paying little attention to the branches that clawed and slashed across his limbs. Nothing mattered but to reach his craft undetected. That, at least, was well hidden. It lay low and dormant in a small clearing, he had set the External Illusion dial to give it the shape and general appearance of a grey, weather-smoothed rock. Suddenly, he glimpsed its reassuring outline through the trees and felt calmer. There would be no encounter with the primitives. Once again, he had been spared complications.

Then he stopped. A sensation crept out of his mind and across his body. Something was wrong.

I thought we might start with this, old pipe of my grandfather's," said Toby, fishing the object out of his breast pocket and handing it to his passenger. "Grandpa White was a crusty old devil. Kept a newspaper shop until he was 70, but after that he spent most of his time tinkering with clocks. I can't say I liked him much. It wasn't one of those dawn-and-twilight relationships boys are supposed to have with their grandfathers. He used to call me a "sneaking little blighter" because I'd a habit of picking his pocket for coppers when he dozed off by the fire. To give me my due, I never took more than a sixpence."

His friend turned the unsavoury-looking object over without much interest.

"What do you expect her to be able to tell you from it?"

"Oh, a description of the old man, his bad temper, that sort of thing. She might even mention my mother, because it was a present from her. Did you bring anything along yourself?"

David grunted. He was still feeling somewhat foolish for having come at all.

"A tack box," he said. "It's made of a piece of wreckage I picked up on the shore at Whitty when I was a kid. Came from a trawler that got bashed to pieces in a gale."

"Fine! That should have plenty of vibrations for her!" And I'm stuck all over with heirlooms. My brother's coming of age cuff-links. Tie-pins they gave my father when he retired. Handkerchief – that's very special." Toby smiled. "Valerie's?"

"You guessed."

"She will too," said Toby. "Whatever else she is, our Madame Victoria's a cunning old thing."

He changed gear, and turned off the main road into an area of terraced houses, each one scrupulously curtained with lace and surrounded by iron railings.

"But I think," added Toby quietly, "I've got something this time that will really show us what she's made of."

Your second cousin's teething ring?

Toby pulled the car into the pavement and stopped. He peered up through the railings at a lit window. It was a terraced house among terraced houses.

"Are we there? Is this it?" demanded David, incredulous. "I was expecting something more ... eccentric." He shrugged. "Well, here goes!" He'd unclipped the seatbelt and half opened the car door, when Toby laid a hand on his arm.

"Hey, wait a minute! Don't you want in on the conspiracy? I've been keeping this thing till I could persuade you to come. It should be a real test for her and I wasn't going to waste it on a visit without a sceptic along for company. What do you make of it?"

Toby handed his friend a small metallic object. It had a dull white finish, and appeared to be some kind of digging implement, shaft and scoop beautifully integrated. David turned it over perfunctorily. He was rather impatient to get inside.

"Some sort of dinky trowel," he said. "What's so special about it?"

"What would you say it's made of?"

"Steel, aluminium; hell I don't know."

"It's not," said Toby, wistfully. "It's not made of any metal I know."

"How do you make that out?"

Toby took his curio back and ran a finger over it thoughtfully. "You know that new estate they're building on the Dingle?"

"I remember you petitioning against it."

"Right. We lost. Progress," Toby shrugged. "Well, I was picking my way across it with the dog one Sunday, when I saw this, this thing, just the shaft part of it, sticking out of a trench they were digging. The sun was shining on it and made it look bone white. I pulled it out and when I saw how small it was and how it had been embedded deep down like the well, I didn't think it could belong to the builders, so I kept it. Pretty useful in the greenhouse it is, too."

"So what?"

"At some point the kids must have been using it and left it lying around somewhere. Something like that. I missed it for a while, and then apparently it got scooped up with the leaves, because it reappeared in one of our bonfires last autumn. The fire was almost out when I noticed it. I raked it out of the ashes. Then, before I could stop him, the kid from next door picked it up. Of course, I thought he'd get badly hurt. I yelled at him to drop it. He just stood there, holding the thing. "It's OK," he said, "it's stone cold." I didn't believe him till I'd actually felt it myself. He was right. Since then, I've tried far higher temperatures on it. I even put it in the kiln they've got at the local grammar school for pottery classes. Result is always the same. It just doesn't transmit heat at all."

"Wouldn't a scientist be more help to you than Madame Victoria?"

"Oh, scientists," Toby laughed, "they'll give me the facts, no doubt. But I'd like to savour the impressions first and it really should spice up our visit a bit. Let's go in."

Madame Victoria (alias Mrs Mabel Williams, widow) welcomed her clients with repugnantly strong cups of tea. Her plump figure auspiciously clad in black, fake silk, she surveyed the men from the depths of her chintzy armchair. One had been before, the other was new and what she saw in this stranger's eyes was familiar to her. She pursed her scarlet lips. "You know, you must try to keep an open mind, my love, if you want results," she said good-naturedly. Her little dark eyes twinkled with humour. David warned to try.

"Try anything once," he mumbled.

Madame Victoria held out a nicely padded hand. "Well, then, what shall it be first?"

She was on form that night. Toby glowed with gratification as, eyes half-closed, leaning slightly forward and a little hunched in her chair like a large homely cat, Madame Victoria ran her fingers over David's cuff-link, and ploddingly described both face and character of David's brother.

"I'm afraid you two don't get on so well," she con-

cluded disarmingly as she handed the cuff-link back. David turned an embarrassed pink.

Toby's pipe came next and this produced something more spectacular.

"This belongs to a person who has passed over," announced the little woman soberly, "but he is here with me now. He has a bent back and white hair. His eyes are two different shades of green. He's angry with



Toby. "Toby is a thriving little ... " He says you took pennies out of his ...

"All right, I'm convinced," broke in Toby uncomfortably. "I don't think we want any more of that ... What about this?"

Madame Victoria, preoccupied with the pipe and grandpa, frowned. She didn't like interruptions and there was more to be said. Respectfully she laid the pipe on the arm of her chair, instead of giving it back, and with some reluctance accepted the white metallic object which Toby was thrusting at her.

Something was wrong. He sensed the danger of discovery. Cold with horror he tried to trace the sensation back to its source in his mind. This action prompted him to feel about his body. Had he all his equipment? His specimen cylinder, his knife, his direction-finder, his plant scoop? Had he dropped or forgotten something? An attachment-thong hung empty from his belt; the scoop was missing. Frantically he felt about his garment; it was true; the scoop was not there. Through his mind pounded the Cultural Contamination Veto, paragraph twelve: 'All equipment to be accounted for on termination of mission. Maximum penalties apply in the case of personnel who discard or mislay equipment on a primitive planet, thereby contaminating it with evidence of alien activity ...'

He must retrieve the scoop! Longingly he stared at his ship with its silent invitation of seclusion. He had no choice but to turn his back on it. He thought of the primitives with their spears and stood silently motionless a while, waiting for the dog bark. At last it reached him; it was very faint, apparently from a considerable way off. Anxiously, he stared at the black trees that rose in intricate colonnades ahead of him. Could he find his way back to the exact spot where he'd collected the specimens? As this mission was not a preliminary survey, he'd had no instructions to chart the flora's precise distribution – it was known already – so he'd had no reason to take particular note of where in the forest he dug. Why should he? The control-disc centred in his belt kept him in contact with his ship. He'd been in no danger of losing himself.

How, then, was he to find the place where he'd left the scoop? Or, worse still, what if he had not left it there at all? What if it had fallen from his belt as he walked? He could hardly hope to retrace his steps with anything like accuracy. Yet he had to hope; he set out in what felt like the right direction.

As he moved, he began to understand. There was a way to find the scoop and it had to do with the sensation he had been trying to analyse. What he felt circulating through his body was not the threat of discovery. No. If he would only admit it, his senses told him he was discovered already! He was actually being looked at. Through the trees, a strong gaze was being directed at him and his instinct registered it. He also understood, without any pedestrian rationalising, that he had only to follow this gaze to its eyes, to find what he had lost.

"Other," Madame Victoria was saying. Her voice had grown husky. It should have sounded comic, thought David, but something had happened to her round face, as if under its abundant rouge it had turned grey with effort. Evidently a desperate extension of the woman's mind was in process and he found it alarming. "Other ... Very old. Thousands of years ... ago ... " Her voice trembled. The carefully arranged powder on her forehead, David could see, was caking with perspiration, he glanced at Toby, wondering if this sort of thing was usual.

Was the old woman going to pass out? Was it just David's imagination or was Madame Victoria beginning to look frightened?

Toby refused to meet David's eye. He was sitting on the edge of his chair, pale with excitement.

"Other ... " repeated Madame Victoria, more emphatically, 'not allowed ...'

As he moved through the forest, he could feel the gaze strengthen. Intuitively he understood that the eyes had not quite focused yet, because they were not physically present. Greater will was required if they were to focus and she hadn't that much will because she was terrified. But now, fragmented by the trees and branches, he, at least, could see her: a strange rectangle, patterned in colours, with a robust black stump growing out of the middle and in the pale head of this stump, there was sentience and intelligence and eyes. The eyes were open, but the gaze this creature directed at him was not coming from them; it was a blind stare as he approached. She mouthed 'No' pleadingly.

He was calm now. He had been fortunate. Matters could still be put right and without the necessity of killing. There was nothing here in the present to kill. As he drew nearer, he realised the black stump in the rectangle had, in fact, four limbs, as had the Primitives, and that he was looking at one of their far-off descendants in relation to some artificial thing that altered its department. His eyes moved over her body. Where the lower limbs bent, nestling on the black, with the hands playing over it, he saw what he had come for: the white scoop. It was through this that her gaze rose up at him. Resolutely he bent, reached out and lifted the implement out of her lap. His digital filaments brushed the grass where the scoop lay as they curled round its smooth shaft and raised it.

In the second before they did so, Madame's gaze focused. She saw. The front lounge of her terraced house was profoundly silent. David and Toby sat transfixed with amazement. Incredulity and horror completely masked the plump little woman's face.

As he lifted the scoop, he realised she saw him and in reflex panic twisted to strike at her. Nothing there. Only trees, the forest carpet of leaves, silence. Of course. She had seen, but not seen: the scoop was safely in his grip. Still, he was badly shaken. Not only her gaze, but that moment, but also something of her reaction had reached him. It felt terrible to inspire such fear; it saddened him. This time he checked the ground more thoroughly for any possible contamination, before setting back towards his ship.

Yes, yes, clocks," Madame Victoria was saying, "something to do with timepieces. He had a whole collection of them."

"That's right!" cried Toby, jubilant, "the old rogue had a room full of them and he always called them his timepieces. Quite right!"

Madame Victoria smiled. She looked fatigued and pale. "I think I've done enough for tonight, if you don't mind," she said softly. "Not as young as I was." She gave a vague laugh and handed back the pipe.

Toby and David found they were glad to pay up and leave. They were both drenched in sweat and their collars felt uncomfortable.

"Was it hot in there?" demanded David, settling gratefully back into the car. "I feel I've melted."

Toby smiled, there were rings round his eyes and he felt exhausted. "Maybe it was a bit stuffy." He climbed in behind the wheel. "How about it?" he asked. "Were you impressed?"

"Yes, very."

"You don't sound it."

"Oh," said David, feeling suddenly muddled and out of sorts. "I was, really, she was quite accurate and all that. It's just that I've come away feeling I'd expected something more, somehow. Though I can't think what."

Toby considered this. "You've about summed it up," he agreed. "I was expecting something more, too. Something, well, more spectacular." He pulled a tiny frown. "Madame Victoria said, 'how come that? How about a drink? God knows what Madame puts in that brew of hers, but I feel half doped.'"



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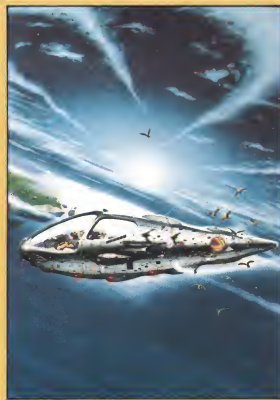


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Legend of CX-118

Last year we gave readers the opportunity of buying two sets of sf posters at a special bargain price of 50p each or three for £1. The posters offered included five by Bruce Pennington and one by Tim White; it was a fair selection, but we didn't give you much choice as to which three posters you wanted. We're now in a position to offer all six posters, at the same bargain prices, and leave it to you to choose which ones you want. Examples of all the posters are shown on this page, so all you have to do is select the ones you like and send the order form off.

The posters are all the same size (27½ inches by 20 inches) and they've been taken from Bruce Pennington's cover illustrations for Brian Aldiss' *Earthworks*, Isaac Asimov's *Space Ranger*, Frank Herbert's *Green Brain* and *Whipping Star*, and *The Worlds of Robert Heinlein*; the sixth poster is Tim White's colour illustration for *Legend of CX-118* which appeared in *SF* Vol 1 No 11. This is a limited offer, exclusive to SFM readers. To make sure of your copies of these posters, simply fill in the order form and send it to the publishers, New English Library, together with your remittance — and send it as soon as possible.

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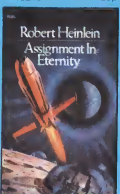
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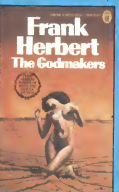
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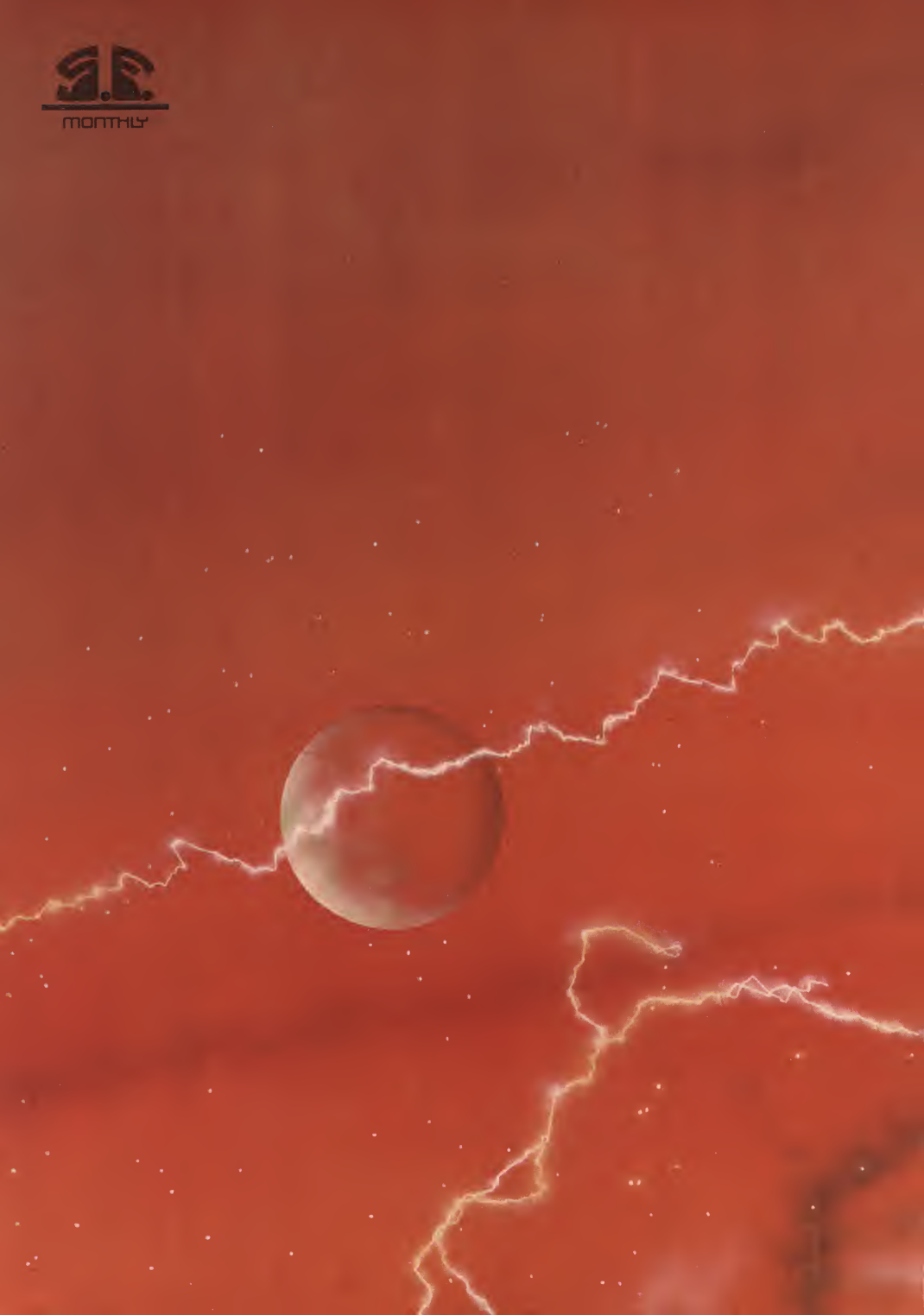
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Could you tell me all you know about the work of Cordwainer Smith, especially his stories of the Underpeople?  
*R P Harrison, Daventry, Northants.*

Though he is reputed to have authored two novels in the 1940s under the name of Felix C Forrester, his first appearance as Cordwainer Smith was in the magazine *Fantasy Book* in 1950. In the ten years preceding his death he contributed some thirty stories to *Amazing*, *Galaxy*, *If* and other magazines; tales which were highly regarded by critics and connoisseurs for combining novel invention with superb detail, compelling characters, and a sensitive compass. Most of them fit into an intricate pattern based on the author's conception of a whole new universe with its own natural laws and mythology.

Space Lords (Sidgwick 1969; *Sphere 1970*) assembles five stories depicting a universe of AD 15,000 where the ruthless Lords of the Instrumentality control the lives of its inhabitants. The Planet Buyer and The Underpeople (Sphere 1975) continue the story of this pseudo-human slave race, who find an ally in the sole owner of man's home planet — Rod McBan of Old North Australia, or Norstilia. These last two books, first issued in the USA as Pyramid paperbacks, have now been published by Ballantine, New York, as a single volume titled Norstilia — the

Readers' questions on any aspect of science fiction are dealt with in this regular feature by Thomas Sheridan, who is internationally known as one of the foremost experts on the medium. Address your questions to THE QUERY BOX, 'Science Fiction Monthly', New English Library Ltd, Barnard's Inn, Holborn, London EC1N 2JR. They will be answered as soon as possible.

Other paperback titles are You Will  
Never Be the Same (*Regency* 1963),  
Quest of the Three Worlds (*Ace* 1966),  
and Under Old Earth (*Panther* 1970).  
The Best of Cordwaine Smith  
(*Ballantine* 1974) is now available here  
through Futura. And if you want to  
know more about this distinctive writer,  
you'll find it in Exploring Cordwaine  
Smith, a 36pp booklet issued last year  
by Algor Press at \$2.50. Address: PO  
Box 4175, New York, NY 10017, USA.

Where and when did the Russian scientist Tsiolkovsky first advance the concept of the space-ark; and what was the book in which J D Bernal put forward the idea in 1929?

Jean-Pierre Moumon, La Valette, France.

*The suggestion that a spaceship carrying 'a large company' might embark on a voyage to the stars that would last 12,000 years may be found in Konstantin Tsiolkovsky's Outside the Earth (or Beyond the Planet Earth), in which he advanced some of his more fanciful ideas on space-travel. Though he started writing this story in 1896, it*

*The story, set in the year 2017, tells of 'colonies' being established beyond Earth's atmosphere, and of a trip to the Moon and the Asteroids in a rocket-ship built by an international team of scientists. It is included in The Call of the Cosmos, a collection of Tsiolkovsky's sf writings published in English in 1961 by the Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow.*

*Professor J D Bernal's notions of entire communities being launched across space in giant arks, in which generations of men would live and die, were aired in his book The World, the Flesh and the Devil, first published by Kegan Paul in 1929 and reissued by Cape in 1974 in both hardcover and paperback.*

Could you give me any details concerning John Muller? I have a number of his books but have not come across any recently.

*J Brice, Paddock, Huddersfield.*  
*The name of John E Muller appeared*

Among later titles carrying the Muller by-line were *Dark Continuum*, *Mark of the Beast*, *The Man from Beyond* and *Survival Project*. These appeared during 1964-65, by which time some earlier titles were being published in hardback in the USA, where the name Marston Johns was also used. I met Fanthorpe, a former schoolmaster from Norfolk, when he was working in Essex about three years ago as an industrial training officer, but he would appear to have done with science fiction, unless he is still hiding his light under a pseudonym.

At the beginning of Brian Aldiss' *Earthworks* are some lines of poetry which are accredited to 'RCA 301 Computer'. Is this a joke of his or did a computer actually write them?  
Owen F Ransen, Biggleswade, Beds.

To make sure, I put your question to author Aldiss, who replied: 'The quotation is genuine; an RCA computer did write it. I seem to remember I got the quotation from Time in 1964.' I remember it, too, and the bother it caused among human poets at the time. I can't accede to your request for some more lines, though I kept them by me for several years, but I can offer you this Japanese product of 'Cybernetic Serendipity' exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in 1968. It is mercifully brief:

eons deep in the ice  
I paint all time in a whorl  
bang the sludge has cracked

Congratulations, Mr. Brosnan! You bore in the most expert way. Tell me pray, why you are a traditionalist when it comes to cinematic effects? And why do you prefer film to videotape? I'm so, so interested, along with, I bet, two others! Your analysis

To continue, alas and alack, with this tirade:

Maxim Jakubowski (tone-deaf singer of the Czech Republic) is a real gem! To review the new Jefferson Starship album, and call it shit to boot! Is beyond belief. Why don't you admit that the LP was reviewed because the bands are called Starship. By your criteria, *Wings' Venus and Mars* is fit as shit must be, it's named after two planets!), a masterpiece of pop music, and *Jefferson Starship* is an irrelevant stab in the back to the Tangerines' whole patry efforts, etc. etc." Well, of course, *you* know their efforts are patry, so that wraps it up! I look forward to your reviews of current if albums such as *Jefferson Starship's* *Jefferson Starship*, *Spanish Train* (those who know the albums will know what I mean).

Will someone tell me if Julie (Encyclopaedia Galactica) Davis is being paid for her regular *News* page? I suppose that she is but to think that my 40p is paying her wages makes my blood boil. *News* has gone from bad to bloody useless. To see my point look at all the information given out in Vol 3 Nos 1 & 2. Real sf freaks could put that column (the word is forced upon me it is a misnomer) to some real use, *eg* review fanzines (real ones; not unctuous, pretentious things 'Chris Priest is Kafka-influenced' efforts).

That's it - I've had my say, flung my hook, given vent to my feelings, etc. You can like it or lump it — the latter I suppose since I have told too many home truths. I'll continue to buy the magazine, dedicated idiot that I am, but I don't for one solitary moment suppose my letter will make the slightest difference to the style and format of *SFM*. Believe it or not, however, there is nothing I would like more than for *SFM* to succeed, but the way it's going it will be dead before the end of 1976.

**Bill Little (Stoke-on-Trent, Staffs)**

# AN INTERVIEW WITH DIG COMPTON PETER LINNETT

Can you tell me something about your background and how you became interested in writing?



I wanted to be a writer all my life. As far back as I can remember, I was writing nature poems and I wrote magazine stuff at school. My mother and father were both in the theatre, so I was going to be a playwright; mainly because plays were shorter than books and were therefore that much easier! While I was at school I had a couple of plays put on.

After National Service I went into the theatre as a stage manager – which is a polite word for dogbody – as I reckoned this was the best way to learn about the theatre and to write for it. That didn't last very long, as I got married quickly and had a couple of children. I was 21. I went off to Cornwall to practise my ambition of being a writer; the trouble was I didn't have anything to say. I showed a perfect facility at school, but I had nothing whatever to write about. During this time I did odd jobs, on the docks and so on, then returned to London and got an ordinary dull job. I did a little writing, including radio plays, because they were even shorter than ordinary ones and easier to sell because there's a huge, steady market. I also wrote a lot of short stories. In those days there were markets left, but not for my stories. More radio plays; I turned to comedy and sold three over about three years. Life was very hectic, I had a very stormy matrimonial life for seventeen years, in fact, from when I was married in 1951.

Anyway, this intermittent literary activity went on until the Sixties. I wasn't getting anywhere with any kind of career, I'd done all the non-things that people who think they're writers do, rather than getting on with a sequence of jobs that will lead somewhere. We decided I was a little older and wiser on the subject of writing, so I quit my job and went back to the archetypal artist's cottage in Devon. I started writing seriously, full-time – day and night, really. I did that for a year and sold nothing at all. I'd gone all avant-garde. I was writing very symbolic radio comedies – all those great meanings somewhere. They didn't sell. I'd run out of money and was on National Assistance, so I thought I had better try one of those awful long things, a book. I wrote a crime novel, which sold immediately for £75. It was almost the first money I'd ever earned from my writing. I wrote six of those, in fairly quick succession. During this time I'd got myself an agent for my plays, who discovered the German market for me, and all those earnest, culture-filled comedies, which the BBC hadn't been able to make anything of at all, Germany lacked up.

The crime novels were done purely for money; you didn't have any literary pretensions?



I tried to write them as well as I could. I wish they had been better; they're not at all good and are best forgotten. I was certainly learning about putting together a book and, I hoped, getting some

overwriting out of my system. At the end of six of those, we hadn't made the breakthrough that my publisher and I had hoped for and we didn't see much point in going on. I didn't mind very much because I'd just had an idea for a novel. I was very concerned at the time about overpopulation. I was interested in its control, had an idea about how it could be done and wrote *The Quality of Mercy*. I sent it off to Hodder & Stoughton, who accepted it at once and said it was science fiction. I wasn't at all happy about it being called *sf* because I knew nothing about it at all. I imagined it was still *Amazing Stories*, of which I'd seen the jackets and hadn't even read – how vulgar and tasteless, I thought. I don't want anything to do with that. However, one doesn't argue; what is in effect one's first book is sold to a publisher.

So there I was, I had written an *sf* novel and Hodder was interested in another one. I had sort of a Utopia lined up, so I did that – it's *Farewell, Earth's Bliss*. I felt that the society I constructed there was just about the happiest men had a right to expect. I don't think anybody ever recognised it as a Utopia.

Had you read any *sf* before writing *The Quality of Mercy*?



As a lad I'd read *Nineteen Eighty-four*, *Brave New World* and *When the Sleeper Wakes*. They weren't *sf*, you see, they were books. I was a great admirer of John Christopher, though I didn't recognise his work as *sf*. I admired *The Death of Grass* for its relationships, its people, which is what I always look for in books. I had also read with less admiration, only enjoyment, the John Wyndham books. No, I hadn't really read much *sf* at all. I didn't know anything about the *sf* world. I think this is why I have subsequently found my books to have such tired ideas. I thought they were startlingly original and thought-provoking, and as such were worth doing. If I had been aware how much they had been worked on already, and that whatever thought was going to be provoked along that line had been provoked already by a lot of other people, I probably would have abandoned the whole idea.

I had pretensions in those days; I was going to haul *sf* away from the limited readership. At first I couldn't comprehend why my books were selling to anybody at all, because if they were *sf*, what the hell was this other thing which was also *sf* – *Amazing Stories* and so forth? I still do not comprehend the enormous span of what is called *sf*; I do not know if the same people read the entire spectrum. I've never had any idea for whom I am writing. I once addressed a group of *sf* enthusiasts in Cambridge and it was a disaster, because I'm not an addresser of enthusiasts – I'm not an addresser of anybody. I suddenly realised how young the readership was, in that they were referring to books of mine which were six years old, which they had read when they first came out. They were only about 20 at this time, so they had been reading my books at the age of 15. That astonished me; I hadn't imagined that sort of readership at all.

After you'd published half a dozen *sf* novels, did you think of yourself as an *sf* writer or as a writer who happened to write *sf*?



I was still so ignorant of the genre that I did not wish to think of myself as a writer who wrote *sf*. I was a writer who wrote novels which for marketing reasons were called *sf*! Ignorance, largely; literary snobbery.

You did five *sf* novels for Hodder because they asked you to, but you kept on writing *sf* after you left them. You must find something congenial in this kind of writing.



Yes, indeed. For me the extrapolation technique is a very good way of writing about today; exaggerating a particular aspect. If you like, writing

about today in symbolic terms, calling it tomorrow. It's a technique which is useful for the sort of thing I want to say. It was a useful way of writing sociology, although I didn't feel consciously I was doing anything like that. More recently, when people have asked me what I thought I was doing, that occurred to me. What I like about the *sf* label is that as a very middle-range novelist – middle-range in thought and literary ability – it enables me to be read by a lot more people than the ordinary middle-range novelist who doesn't have a genre to back him up. It automatically guarantees a certain number of people will read a book. Therefore I've given up on any snobbery or any wish for my books not to be called *sf*. I've discovered there's room for all sorts of things under the label.

Your novels differ from nearly all other *sf* in their concentration on the characters. Most *sf*, even when its characters are at least believable, isn't interested in them, it's interested in the idea. I feel that your books sometimes skip on the background a little to concentrate on the characters. What do you say to people who feel that *sf* doesn't have time to worry about character?



The principal thing that interests people is other people. We're interested in ourselves and we see ourselves in other people. I do not find myself remotely interested in stories that are not about people, and I doubt very much that appreciable numbers of other people are interested in them. There are many genres, the James Bond type book for example, which don't present a person and do extremely well. I don't want to read them, I'm interested in people. What is a little worrying is my awareness that my books begin the wrong way round; they begin with an idea. A novelist, by this I mean a non-*sf* writer, begins with a lot of people. 'What will happen to these interesting people? I want to write about them.' I think this is the best way to write a book, the way books ought to begin. It's not the way mine begin. They begin with an idea, a mechanical notion, for example, rhesus negatives, cancer, bloodstains, in *The Quality of Mercy*. Then I've got to dress it up with some interesting people. Soon after that the people take over; the idea is simply a framework. The books begin with an idea, and I rather wish they didn't, because I think they'd be better if they didn't. Better 'something', perhaps not better *sf*!

Do you think much about your characters before beginning a book?



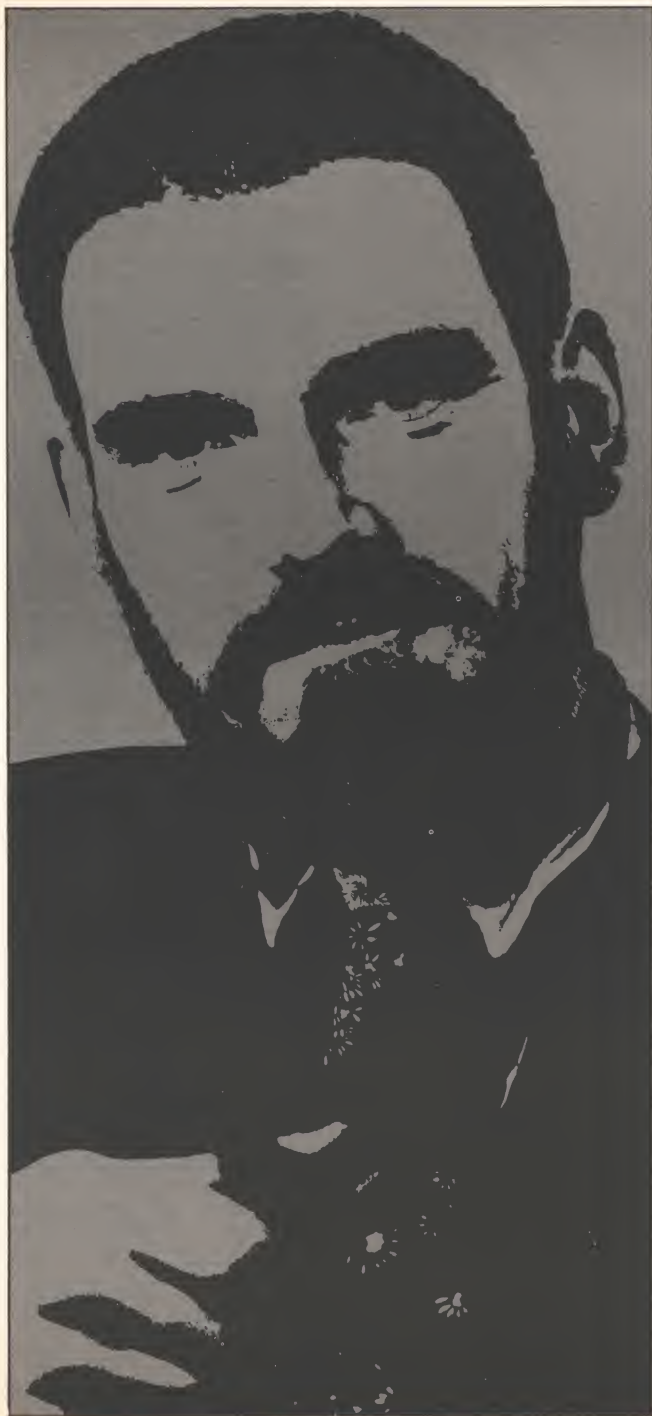
No, they grow very much on the page, which is why the book goes very slowly at first. Until I have to make the characters say and do something. I don't have a picture of what they are going to be like at all. They grow as they go along, as I find out about them.

A lot of your characters are religious people. Does this reflect your own beliefs?



I am very concerned about matters of religion. I have no religious beliefs; I frequently try to acquire one. I have tried to get to know people who have one and who are coherent about it. That is probably why they creep in, usually respectfully. I expect people can manage to maintain a religious belief in spite of what, to me, is overwhelming evidence to the contrary. I knew the Catholic girl in *The Electric Crocodile* very well indeed; she represented my period of investigating Catholicism and failing abysmally to be convinced, but wishing I could have been. I've known a lot of churchmen and, oddly enough, got on with them extremely well. They also feature in my books quite frequently, I hope sympathetically. It's so rare in fiction these days to find a clergyman who isn't a figure of fun. I made an exception with the clergyman in *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* whom I couldn't resist. I couldn't present all clergymen as being wise and gentle.





Another noticeable aspect of your books is the poor state of the marriages in several of them. Can you comment on that?



I have great personal experience of this. So much so that I came to doubt the possibility of a man and a woman really understanding each other sufficiently to live together successfully. I hope that there is never a guilty party, that the portraits of both sides of the unhappy marriages are sympathetic. Failures in this field are never one man's or one woman's fault. They all come out of incomprehension. But recently I have come to the conclusion, from personal experience, that marriages can work, that second marriages are more likely to work than first ones because you've found out more about it and you're that much older and wiser. You don't expect too much, and you understand much more about what is to be given and what is to be received. I presented relationships that I believed in and wanted to write about. If they were unhappy marriages, it was because they were all I knew about at the time.

*It seemed to me that Donald in The Quality of Mercy was such an unsympathetic character by the end of the book that you didn't care what happened to him. He seemed to be deliberately ignoring what was going on around him.*



Well, he was beaten by the machine; a recurring theme in my books. It was necessary for him to ignore what was going on. The interest in that book – once I'd had the original superficial idea, of feeding places with some horrible germ – was, how would you get people to do it? Decent, virtuous, serious-minded people. The book grew out of the effort of one man *not* to know something that would destroy him if he *did* know it. He is helped by the international system not to know. He resists everybody; he resists his friend's efforts to make him know. There are a lot of people, especially in the armed services, who exist on this level of being able not to know what they're doing. The book is a portrait of what would happen to that chap in those circumstances. He has a choice of putting his head in the gas oven, if you like, or not knowing. All of us do it, in one way or another. All of us can choose not to know all sorts of unpleasant things about what our governments do – torturing suspects in Northern Ireland or what happens in important bacteriological experiments. Don't tell us, because we don't want to be told. I hope Donald is a victim rather than just an unsympathetic character. If he isn't, I've failed.

*That relates to some of your other books, in which science is a threat, Synthajoy for example. Does it represent your opinion about the direction science might take in the future, that it might be used for bad rather than good?*



Science is a reflection of the people who use it, which is a platitude to end all platitudes. So much of my thinking is directed towards wondering how one can make better systems work. For example, I am very worried by universal franchise, the democracy we all go on about so much. It distresses me that every man should have an equal vote – and yet all systems that I try to devise, such as qualitative franchise by political examination, or by IQ tests, or by anything else which might be better, end up exploitable and therefore worse. This is extremely relevant to the idea in *The Electric Crocodile* which is some way of muzzling, or directing science, selectively directing it for the good of man, rather than allowing a blanket advance of the crocodile. The only way I could think of was the computer bay and it's open to abuse immediately. That solution, like all the others, would be worse than the problem, because it would lead to totalitarianism. So we're stuck with democracy and the random march of science; and no euthanasia – another one. It would seem to be a most

excellent device in any number of cases. Administration of it founders at once. Who'd take the decisions, apart from anything else? You start giving men power and we all know what that does.

*Most of the futures in your novels are very dehumanised, very miserable for the people who live in them. Would it be true to say that that represents a fear on your part rather than a conviction or do you think that's the way the future's going to go?*



Yes. It's not a fear, it's a conviction. We have all lost faith in the beneficial effects of progress. I just extrapolate from what I see happening. I suppose *Katherine Mortenhoe* grew out of an interview I saw on television, which really belonged to some very black satire – a man saying, 'Mrs O'Reilly, what did it feel like to see your child being blown to bits by a terrorist bomb?' She had consented to be there, to be interviewed. We have had *The Family*, the programmes in America and the disastrous ones over here. I wasn't even extrapolating, I found facts catching up with me almost as fast as I'd got the words down.

*You said in an interview that pessimism provides a very poor justification for writing novels and that you were concerned with this aspect of your work. Have you reached any conclusions, or solutions, since then?*



No solutions. In *Katherine Mortenhoe*, I hope that the end is, in a way, a triumph. I had it pointed out to me by some interviewer what sticky ends my women seem to come to in these books. They are not wholly sticky ends. In *Synthajoy*, indeed, *Thea* goes under, the machine beats her. In *The Electric Crocodile*, on the other hand, the woman's led away to a lunatic asylum, but I feel that she has a victory there. Certainly *Katherine* wins, in my mind; she dies with dignity, on her own, in the way she wants. She beats the system and becomes human, right at the dead end. So – while superficially the ending is depressing, in fact it's not. All right, one's dead and the other's blind, but they've got somewhere, they've climbed out of where they were before, become wiser, nobler, more human. *Katherine Mortenhoe* is not doom-laden at all; it represents a victory, but it wasn't a conscious effort at writing because I was worried about doom, so I would graft on a happy ending.

I think *Chronicles* is not doom-laden, because I have great compassion and affection for old *Roses*, and he survives in a curious non-way. That book and *The Missionaries*, which is much more of a concoction and isn't doom-laden at all, represent a watershed, a change in my own life, leading to a lot more personal happiness. If the futures I see are equally inhuman and awful, the people in them tend to win. As long as I can continue to believe in the possibility of the people still winning – which I didn't, but do now – I have something important to write about, because a lot of people feel they aren't going to go on winning. Very many people aren't. I do think I have resolved the paradox, as I have resolved my own personal problems.

*I imagine some of your books require a lot of research, the *Mars* novel for example or *The Electric Crocodile*, which is set in a scientific establishment. Do you do much research before you start?*



Very little. I was lucky with some help on *The Electric Crocodile*. I have a friend who is a mathematician and who had access to a computer centre in London. He had bought some computer time in the middle of the night, when it's cheap. I went along at about three in the morning, and listened to it and smelt it, and saw these grey-faced, white-coated people working. That was my research for *The Electric Crocodile*! That was the most research I've done for anything. I write around something if I don't know it; I'm very idle on these things. I did have some fan mail on *The Electric Crocodile*. Computer men

wrote and said, at last a computer centre that is not incredible. So I was very, very pleased. It was based on about three hours one night looking at it all. One couldn't read about that feeling at all. There was no substitute for that particular piece of research.

For *Farewell, Earth's Bliss*, I looked up the fact that *Mars* had two moons, and the amount of gravity on it. I think it was Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopedia*, which I had from my childhood. It had a nice little piece with a picture. It was written in 1938; it might even be wildly out of date, but I trusted it anyway. There is really very little science in my books. One talks about circuits and feedbacks and other things, which one gets from radio as much as anything else. You don't have to know what they mean (I don't know if I ought to say all this). It's not terribly important to my books. It is important that they convince, that there is not a block, so that you lose your reader, that's absolutely vital. The science aspect of it does not interest me at all.

*What does seem important in your books is the locale in which the action takes place. It's usually London or the west country.*



Oh yes, I need to know the place and they are the places I know. I don't see how anybody can write about anywhere that they don't know very well. People and place go together so much, I think. The way people operate is influenced by how and where they live, the smells and the feeling of the place. It's very important and I'm glad it's been noticed. I spend a lot of time getting the details right – the light in the evening, or the shadow on the gravel or whatever it may be, which will be right for that place and nowhere else. I don't know why one spends so much time on terribly small things. They're important to me.

*Most of your novels extrapolate no further than 1985 or 1990. Do you think you'll ever go further into the future?*



I don't see any point. I use speculative writing as a way of writing about today, and the speed of change being what it is, I would not have the faintest idea where current trends may have gone further than twenty years ahead. Therefore any more extrapolation would be for the birds, as far as I'm concerned. Also, one always hopes to do something about this dreadful thing that one sees, before it's too late. If you go too far away the immediacy is lost, and also a measure of reader credibility. A man has to believe it's round the corner; he might conceivably think about it and even do something about it. But I don't know what's going to happen. Women are very interested in what's going to happen to the changing position of women in society; but I couldn't possibly extrapolate into a woman-dominated society. I don't think it would be believed in, at the level I hope to be believed in.

*You've published eight sf novels, but only one sf short story. Why is that?*



Ideas come to me very slowly, with great difficulty. I'm not a great ideas man; I do not have the great idea that I see other writers have. If I get an idea it's got to be a book, I can't waste one on a short story! I wouldn't have thought until very recently that there was a market for short stories. I recently discovered that sf is the genre in which the short story is supreme. I hadn't realised that. Still, if I get an idea that's worth writing about, I think it's worth a book. I have written a lot of ghost stories, because I had a friend who edited anthologies of them.

*What is your favourite among the novels you've published to date, and the one you like least?*



I was always fond of *Synthajoy*; I think it

was the most successful at doing what is very difficult. Recently, however, I've become extremely fond of *Katherine Mortenhoe*, so much so, in fact, that I wrote a sequel. (Sequels aren't a good idea, I think.) My least favourite, I think you've noticed, is *The Missionaries*. I don't think it is a successful book. I like the relationships, I'm not ashamed of it because I think the three people in the farmhouse work; but I don't think the story works. I know it falls so far short of my ideal of what it was going to be. That's far and away my least favourite.

*Do you think you'll ever write full-time again?*



It's my continual dream. Looked at realistically, sf will never pay me to write full-time again. I have been around long enough to know that I'm never going to write another *Andromeda Strain* or a *Stand on Zanzibar* that's really going to make a name or any money. So I am working up another identity as a writer that is already making me so much more than sf ever could or will do. I have a little cottage ready in a fishing village, and I'm just waiting for inflation to stop, or some miracle like that to occur, and I will write full-time with joy. There are so many different sorts of books I would like to write. *Sf* will always be in the middle, I think, because with it I can say important things in acceptable ways – in entertaining ways, I hope – that a lot of people read. Any of the other kinds of books that I shall write, except in the new identity I mentioned, will almost certainly be read by about 150 people.

*Can you tell me something about the sequel to Katherine Mortenhoe?*



I was interested in the blind reporter, I'm very interested in blindness as a subject which is handled, to my knowledge, with astonishing fatuity and superficiality by writers in general. I wanted to talk about blindness seriously. I also had my doubts about the nobility of *Roddie's* (the reporter) motives at the end. After I'd written the book I began to be suspicious of the symbolic blindness thing; shutting himself off because he's ugly is not a satisfactory way of coping with life. It was logical at the time, and right perhaps, but I thought he would eventually see it was an unworthy act. It wasn't the right way of dealing with that particular situation. I was interested in how he would find out, in how he would come to examine his motives so painfully. I was also interested in the sort of reception he would get afterwards by the underground, by the young who would see him as a sort of saviour, which would be the last thing he would want out of life. He would be used by people looking for a leader, if he wasn't careful. How was his poor wife going to cope with it all? So I wrote about it. I don't think it's sf. It is set in the future, but that is the only thing about it that is sf. It's about how a blind man and his wife work out their problems. I don't blame the publishers who say they can't market it under an sf banner. It has various sf scenes in it, but that's about all. That one will go into my department of lost causes, which I'm glad to say, is very small; it has one other book in it. I liked it a bit, but rejected it. That was a long time ago. I have another in mind already that will be sf. The mystery writer has to write one first to keep me going, but I shall get that one finished easily this year.

*Can you say something about it? Is it very different from your previous work?*



Very different, yes. I can only make it sound awful and say it's going to be a sex comedy. It's almost certainly going to be very sexy and, I hope, funny. It seems awfully funny to me, thinking over what it's going to be about. Bitter as well, I suppose, but I always seem to get stuck with a note of bitterness somewhere. There has, I think, been more humour creeping into my books recently, which is all to the good.



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